

DAN DUNN'S DOUBLE DEAL!

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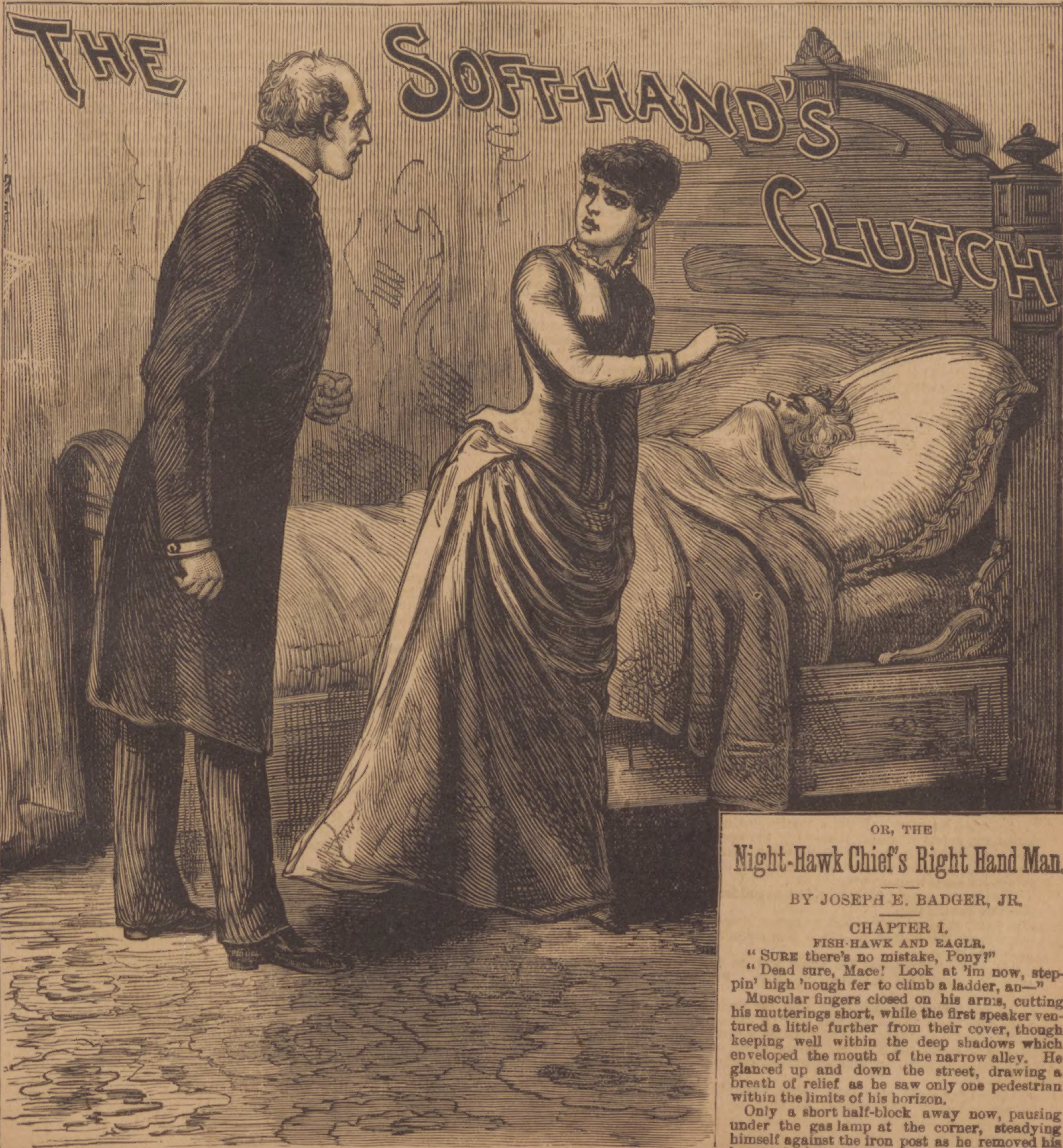
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"TOUCH ME AGAIN AT YOUR PERIL, DOCTOR DAIRMID!"

OR, THE Night-Hawk Chief's Right Hand Man.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

FISH-HAWK AND EAGLE.

"SURE there's no mistake, Pony?"

"Dead sure, Mace! Look at 'im now, step-
pin' high 'nough fer to climb a ladder, an—"

Muscular fingers closed on his arms, cutting his mutterings short, while the first speaker ventured a little further from their cover, though keeping well within the deep shadows which enveloped the mouth of the narrow alley. He glanced up and down the street, drawing a breath of relief as he saw only one pedestrian within the limits of his horizon.

Only a short half-block away now, pausing under the gas lamp at the corner, steadying himself against the iron post as he removed his hat to let the cool breeze from the great river fan his heated brow.

A wolfish growl came from the lips of the shorter night-hawk.

"He'll hang there until a cop sights him, then where'll we be? Bilked, that's what! But you would have it so."

"Button up, Pony, and see that you let him have it—for keeps!"

There was no response to this stern speech, for the lesser ruffian saw that their intended victim had parted from the lamp-post and was once more approaching their ambush.

With his tall, shapely figure clearly outlined against the hazy circle of light, the two thugs could note his slightly unsteady steps as though he was partially under the influence of liquor. And there was a grim sort of contemptuous satisfaction in the low tones of Pony Keefe as he pushed back his coat-cuffs.

"Ain't it jest pie, though? Ef it wasn't too dark here to see my own doin's, blamed ef I wouldn't be ashamed to slug 'im!"

"Button, I tell ye!" grated his companion, flashing keen glances up and across the street.

He could see nothing to arouse his suspicions. The hour was late, and that portion of the town seemed deserted. Their marked prey was drawing near, clearly unsuspecting of impending peril. If armed, which was unlikely, he was hardly in fit condition to make good use of his weapons. Their cover was almost perfect, and once within reach of their strong arms, escape seemed impossible.

Yet Mace Wilson was strangely uneasy. It was not that the black deed itself awed him, for he had been born in sin and reared in crime. It was rather a wild-beast instinct that warned him of danger; not sharply enough to make him abandon his evil work, but quite sufficient to set his always keen senses on the alert.

Pony Keefe, on the contrary, had thoughts only for the rich prize so nearly within their clutches. His little eyes glowed covetously as his bull-dog jaws squared. He gave his billy a vicious swing, crouching low beside the damp brick wall, his powerful left arm crooked as though already garroting his victim.

Neither night-hawk looked at his comrade. Each had his part outlined, and each felt confident that the other would not be found lacking when the moment for action came. And with a last searching glance over the street, Mace Wilson also crouched for the deadly dash.

The unsuspecting wayfarer drew nearer, the sound of his boot-heels changing as he stepped from the brick pave to the rocks of the alley crossing, the slight descent making his gait still more unsteady, and fortunately causing him to lurch toward the street, just as Pony Keefe measured his distance and made his leap, cutting the air with his billy as he came.

The blow took effect, but was much less vicious than had been intended, thanks to that sudden lurch. It was enough to stagger the man, his crushed hat flying into the gutter as he gave vent to a gasping cry, instinctively throwing up his arms to guard himself.

With a curse Pony Keefe was upon the victim, one hand fiercely clutching at his throat, his other wielding that cowardly weapon. And Mace Wilson, too, sprung forward, the three men going down in a heap.

"Do him up! Don't let him yelp out like—"

The savage words came from Mace Wilson, but he never completed the sentence.

A tall, athletic figure leaped lightly forward, stooping as he reached that little heap of humanity, a single blow from his clinched right hand knocking Wilson end over end into the dark alley.

"You, too!"

Pony Keefe gave a yell of angry pain as his billy was wrenched from his grasp just as it was descending for a death-blow. Then he was caught by the arms and swung bodily into the air, flying over the broad shoulders of the newcomer, to fall flat across the horse-car track in the center of the street. And as he scrambled to his feet, confused, bruised, half-stunned, the shrill trilling of a police-whistle rung out upon the night-air.

It needed no more. With a thief's instinct, he sought safety in flight, distorting his figure and contorting his face as he flashed a glance backward, already preparing an *alibi* in case he should elude his pursuer.

The rescuer sprung after him, but as suddenly checked the impulse.

A faint moan, hardly louder than a breath, came from the gutter in which the assaulted man was lying.

"It looks botchy, but I'll know who to ask into my parlor if it comes to that. Just now—"

He was facing the dark alley, and his preternaturally keen senses warned him of life and motion in that quarter. With catlike activity he sprung aside and forward at the same motion, his right hand drawing a pistol from about his middle.

He caught sight of a bent figure shambling down the alley, and though another second blended that shadow with others, the interval was long enough for hand and eye to act in concert; Mace Wilson was covered by that grim

muzzle, and a simple contraction of that finger would have wiped out his earthly score for all time.

The action was purely instinctive, and such as only a natural-born snap-shot can make; an instance of the body acting more swiftly than the brain, for the weapon was lowered undischarged the instant its holder saw that the footpad was in full flight.

"Go it, ye cripple!" he muttered, with a disgust that was not entirely impersonal. "And I thought I hit you fair!"

The revolver vanished from sight, and the man turned to bend over the prostrate figure in the gutter, pausing to flash a quick glance down the street as a well-known sound came to his ears.

It was like the echo of that trilling whistle which had so startled Pony Keefe and his companion in crime, but a few seconds earlier.

"When this cruel war is over!" softly whistled the good Samaritan, not deigning to answer the signal just then, though he caught sight of its maker hastening up the car-track, club on pistol drawn. "Beg pardon for disturbing your *siesta*, my dear sir, but—I really thought those rascals were toughs of the first water!"

If the policeman was rather late in putting in an appearance, he was apparently gifted with more than ordinary keenness of vision, for while still some little distance off he swung forward his pistol-hand and cried out sternly:

"Throw up your hands, or I'll turn ye into a riddle!"

"Consider them up, partner," coolly responded the other, without taking the trouble to turn his eyes in that direction. "Just play we've gone through the whole programme, and lend me a hand with this gentleman, will you?"

"Who is he? Who are you?" demanded the official, advancing, but with weapon still covering that dark spot. "Who blew that whistle? If you—Steady, my covey!"

"While the grass is growing, the horse is starving!" laughed the stranger, but with a touch of impatience in his tones as he added: "And while you're playing Recorder, this poor devil may be losing his grip on life! A dead man on your beat, officer! That would hardly win you a step, would it?"

"If I run you in—"

"That would be the last feather, surely!" with a short, hard laugh, as he rose erect, both hands above his head as he strode toward the officer, adding curtly: "Don't make me 'pull' you, my dear fellow. The chief told me I might look for aid and backing in his force, but if this is a fair sample, I reckon I'll play a lone hand from now on."

He stepped out where the rays of the full moon could strike his face and broad bosom, then opened his coat sufficiently to show a golden badge pinned over his heart.

The policeman started, his armed hand dropping quickly, his manner changing with almost ludicrous abruptness.

"Is it—you are—"

"Dan Dunn, at your service, sir," was the curt interjection.

"I beg pardon, sir," muttered the humbled officer, hanging his head for a moment. "It was so dark, and I only saw—"

"Drop it. See what can be done for the gentleman, will you?"

Dan Dunn turned about and once more bent over the unfortunate in the gutter. But the gloom where he lay was too great for anything like a satisfactory examination, and without a seeming effort he lifted the figure in his arms, bearing it out across the car-track, depositing it where the full light of the moon fell upon it.

A handsome face, despite the twin streaks of blood which trickled from the gashes cut by that ugly implement in the muscular grip of Pony Keefe, and the policeman uttered a sound of mingled pity and indignation as he bent over it.

"You know him, then?" asked Dan Dunn, with something peculiar in his own tones as his keen eyes scanned that face.

"Like a book, sir," was the prompt response. "It's Berry Barfort, as white a lad as ever trod the streets of St. Jo! If he's croaked—Who slugged him? I'd rather run them in than win the badge Chief Croder wears this night!"

"They didn't stop to leave their cards with me," dryly responded Dan Dunn, kneeling beside the still unconscious man, his trained fingers passing rapidly yet thoroughly over the lacerated scalp. "Not so bad as it might have been!" with an air of relief as Barfort shuddered and gave a feeble moan. "No bones broken, and—Lend a hand, partner, and we'll get him down to the Pacific House."

"Wouldn't it be best to take him to his boarding-place? It's only a few blocks up-street, and—"

"And less than half as far to the hotel," curtly interrupted the other. "I prefer to take him there, unless you seriously object."

There was no reply to this bit of sarcasm, and between them they lifted Berry Barfort to his feet, all the easier that the young man was beginning to recover his consciousness.

CHAPTER II.

RENA COVENTRY AND DR. DAIRMID.

"You are cruelly tyrannical, Dr. Dairmid! What right have you to deny me admission to the chamber of my father? Stand aside, sir, and permit me to pass!"

Instead, the man caught the white hands which would have brushed him aside had they the power, holding them firmly, his dark eyes filled with a smoldering fire that flatly belied the forced calmness of his tones:

"You are the cruel one, Miss Coventry; cruelly unjust to one who would make a carpet of his heart for your little feet to trample over."

Rena Coventry tried to break that grasp, her blue eyes flashing through the tears which she had been shedding before the entrance of this, her jailer, as she had begun to regard him.

"Must I add ruffian, as well, Dr. Dairmid? Unhand me, sir!"

"I can bear even that better than share your unavailing grief, Rena," he uttered, joining both of her wrists in one of his strong white hands, passing his freed arm about her waist despite her aversive shrinking and leading her back to the chair which she had abandoned at his entrance. "And share it I must if I allow you to rush into his presence without warning. The shock would surely kill him!"

"Without warning?" and there was bitter scorn in her voice, for the moment overmastering all other emotions. "Whose fault would that be? Who has kept me all these bitter long hours from my poor father's bedside? Who—who but you?"

With gentle force Dr. Dairmid placed the maiden in the deep easy-chair, standing before her, his hands behind his back, but in such a position that she could not rise to her feet without his permission.

His dark eyes met hers without flinching. His strong face was pale, but it was habitually without color. Only the reddish glow in his large dark eyes told how strong were his emotions just then.

A few called Dr. Dairmid handsome. Many termed him fine-looking, and they were the nearest correct.

In height he was little if any above the average of his sex, and at a passing glance he seemed even shorter, thanks to his unusually powerful build. His shoulders were broad and square. His chest deep and round, with great lung power. His body full, but with only a suspicion of portliness; that might come with advancing years, but as yet had no more than cast its shadow before. His limbs were very muscular, though there was nothing in them to justify the idea of clumsiness.

His hair, worn a little longer than common, and inclined to curl at the end, was thick and fine, black as the wing of a raven. His beard would probably have shown the same lustrous hue, had he permitted it to grow. As it was, his smoothly-shorn cheeks, his firm lip, and slightly-cleft chin had a peculiar bluish tinge, showing beneath the healthful pallor which was one of his marked characteristics.

His face is not so easy to describe, though an enumeration of his different features might be readily made. It was a face which one will see oftenest in the Roman priesthood: not among the higher ranks, but in remoter parishes, and among the younger members of that order.

Not that Dr. Dairmid was either a Catholic or a priest; there was little of religion and less of saintliness in his composition, as after events will prove; but such was the impression he almost invariably left with a stranger, after a first meeting.

Whether unconsciously or not, his garb added to this impression. Of somber black, fitting his figure snugly, the coat buttoning high, and the vest beneath it covering all save his narrow collar. The material was fine, even costly, but somehow the garb added to his priestly appearance, even among those who best knew his every-day life.

Rena Coventry knew something of this, and it only added loathing to the half-fear that burned in her blue eyes, still bright and lustrous despite the many tears she had shed of late.

A perfect blonde, as Dr. Dairmid was a complete brune, Miss Coventry was more than fine-looking; she was beautiful, as even her own sex had long since been forced to admit, in secret if not with openness.

Her form was as perfect as her face was lovely; tall, queenly, just escaping the charge of voluptuousness in its development.

Her dress was a plain traveling costume of simple gray, as though she had but recently arrived from a long journey, for its folds were rumpled and creased, with signs of travel.

"And why have I done this, Rena?" demanded Dr. Dairmid, the glow in his eyes deepening, a faint smile disturbing his red lips.

"Why—I ask that once more, you cruel monster!" flashed the maiden, starting forward, only to shrink back from his proximity. "Why am I denied admittance to my poor father? Why have you kept me here by force, when—and you say he is ill—ill unto death!"

Her voice choked, and her flushed face paled again as it bowed forward upon her hands. The hot tears trickled through her slender fingers, trembling like melting jewels with the emotion which agitated her hands, before falling into her lap.

Again that faint, puzzling smile flitted across the lips of the doctor, but instantly vanished, to leave his face colder, graver than before. And his voice was absolutely without emotion as he added:

"He is ill. Ill even unto death, as you say, Miss Coventry. And in saying so much, you are answering your own questions."

"And you speak *falsely* in saying so!" flashed the girl, lifting her head to meet his steady gaze. "Who should be with him, if not his only child? Who could—let me go to papa! I will go!"

Swift as thought those white, powerful hands shot forward and clasped her wrists as Rena sought to push him aside. Firmly he held them, preventing her from rising as he spoke more rapidly:

"You shall go—but not right now, Rena. You shall see him, but it must be when and how I determine, my dear child."

"You? Who gave you the right to say *must* and *shall* to me? What right have you to—"

"The best of rights, Miss Coventry," with a half smile and slight inclination of his head. "As your honored parent's physician, who holds himself accountable for his restoration to health and strength."

"You are not—where is Doctor Garfield?"

"In attendance upon such of his patients as still place confidence in his treatment, let us hope," with another fleeting smile. "No doubt your father will explain his reasons for making such a change."

"There *will* be another change, as soon as I do see him, sir!"

"True; and for the worse, unless you can command your feelings far more perfectly, Miss Coventry," was the swift retort, his tones growing harder and colder, despite the deepening glow in his great eyes. "It is this extreme excitability of yours which must excuse my keeping you so long from the bedside of your honored parent. As his physician—"

"You claim the right to keep me a prisoner in my own house all this time?"

"Even longer, if I believe the cause exists," with a cold bow. "I hoped to lead you to your father this evening, but I shall not do so until you have far better control of your nerves, Miss Coventry."

Rena sunk back into her chair, shivering, with a fresh dread of this strange being. She had only disliked, hated, loathed him before, but now she was beginning to actually fear him.

Standing as before, with hands lightly clasped behind his back, his dark orbs fixed steadily upon her changing countenance, Doctor Dairmid added, in cold, measured accents:

"I make no attempt to deny your charges, Miss Coventry. I freely admit that I have ruled you with a rod of iron ever since you reached this, your saddened home, yester evening."

"Why? By what right?"

"The right of a physician who is fighting hand to hand with grim death!" was the swift response. "The right granted me when Knox Coventry called me in to save him from death, if mortal skill could avail!"

"He is my father—I could not harm him—my love—"

"It is part of my duty to see that you do not harm him, by lessening his chance of rallying from the shock, Miss Coventry. And, unpleasant as you insist on making this part of my duty, I am not to be driven from that standpoint. If I see that you can be trusted to—"

"I will be calm. I will not even utter a word. Only permit me to go to my poor, dear father!"

She uttered the words with enforced composure, and though the doctor smiled slightly, he quietly signed his negation.

"Your eyes belie your tongue, my dear child, and I begin to fear that I shall have to keep you on probation for yet another night. I dare not run too great a risk."

Rena turned pale as a corpse, but a hot light leaped into her eyes.

"You dare not—you shall not do that!" she exclaimed, passion struggling through her enforced composure. "I have borne with your insolent assumption of authority too long as it is. I will bear no more."

"May I ask what you intend doing, dear child?"

"Claiming my rights! I mean to see my father, with or without your permission! I have waited too long as it is. Now—permit me to pass on to my father's chamber, or I will send for an officer of the law to protect me in my rights!"

"Bid your messenger fetch a deaf officer, then, Miss Coventry," he bowed, his dark eyes aglow.

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"You force me to say what I hoped to avoid, Miss Coventry," more coldly than ever. "You

force me to give you my secret reason for keeping you so long from the side of your sick parent. I have done this at his express command, and—"

"You are falsifying, sir!" with swift indignation.

"I am telling you the simple truth. Your father, as he felt his brain yielding anew, begged me with tears in his eyes to keep you out from his chamber; away from even the sound of his voice while his delirium lasted, lest you hear—Must I go on, Miss Coventry?"

With a new, strange fear stinging her heart, Rena gazed pantingly into that dark, emotionless countenance. Never before had she so fully realized its icy power. Never before had she so utterly feared this man as in those fleeting moments.

"I do not believe—I will not believe your foul insinuations!" she managed to utter, though she hardly recognized her own voice.

"I regret that fact, Miss Coventry, even more than you will regret it in a few minutes more," was the grave response. "It makes open speech necessary, where I had hoped to preserve a discreet silence."

"In all I have done, I have acted strictly in accordance with the instructions your father gave me when he first felt that his brain was about to fail him. He made me swear to keep you apart from him, no matter how long his delirium might last. He bade me see that you did not even approach his chamber until he himself gave permission; and not even then unless I felt fully assured that he could bear that meeting without again losing control of his powers of mind. He even went so far as to swear that he would rather die without seeing you than to run even the remotest risk of having you learn from his wild ravings what he knew he must, sooner or later, tell you of his own volition."

"You are lying—I do not—I will not believe you!" panted the maiden, hardly conscious of the words she uttered, and feeling a terrible pain at her heart; for, though she denied, she could not keep from believing, in part, at least.

"I know it is hardly considered polite to contradict a lady, even for her own good," slightly smiled Dr. Dairmid, "but in this case I am partly justified. You do believe. How can you help but believe?" with a sudden warmth in his voice and manner that caused the poor girl to shrink still deeper into the easy-chair. "Unless I had some such great and urgent reason, would I dare keep you—as you curtly put it—a prisoner in your own house? Would I dare, even for the good of my patient, restrain you from the side of your sick parent? I might feel I ought to do so, but I could not stand in your path. Only such an excuse would justify me; only to keep you from learning from his raving lips that your father even now shivers under the shadow of the scaffold!"

CHAPTER III.

THE POWER OF LIFE OR DEATH.

VERY impressive was the voice with which Dr. Dairmid pronounced these words, and something of pity shone in his dark eyes and showed itself in his swarthy face as those blue eyes gazed incredulously up at him. Only for a single breath; then Rena Coventry sprang to her feet and flung her weight against him, trying to escape, her indignation breaking forth hotly:

"You dare! You? My father under—Oh, this is too much!"

For a moment the doctor, strong though he was, was staggered, but quickly rallying, his hands closed upon the maiden's shoulders, pushing her back once more into her seat.

"Not for my patience, where your welfare is concerned, Miss Coventry," he said, purposely mistaking her meaning, his countenance graver, more serious than ever as he firmly met her scorching gaze. "Not for the life of your father, which you are madly menacing by giving way to such wild emotions."

"I will go to him—I will tell him all you have so foully accused him of—"

"And thereby insure his madness or death?"

The poor girl shivered, shrinking back as far as possible, yet unable to remove her eyes from those glowing orbs.

Dr. Dairmid saw this, and for a brief space appeared to take pleasure in exercising his magnetic power; but then he smothered the glow, and briefly veiling his eyes, broke the spell. With a faint moan Rena Coventry bowed her head, once more weak and trembling with fear, though in her heart she kept denying that horribly base and fountless charge.

Under the shadow of the gallows! Her father! Noble, true, loving, generous, kingly Knox Coventry! It was a lie! Worse than a lie!

Dr. Dairmid apparently read her thoughts, for he gravely added:

"Would I dare utter the words if they had no foundation in truth, Miss Coventry? Would I so vilely perjure myself, simply to be covered with shame and confusion the moment you succeeded in gaining speech with your parent? No! I admit that I *am* mad—or so you would term it, no doubt!—but I am perfectly sane on this point."

"It is almost as hard for me to speak the words as it can be for you to hear them, my dear child," he added, in softer, more kindly tones. "Only the sternest necessity could make me give them utterance, at this moment; though, worse luck! I have long known the time must surely come when the bitter black past must be laid bare before your eyes."

"I will never believe such foul slander," said Rena, lifting her head and steadily meeting his keen, half-startled gaze. "I know you are lying throughout, when you dare accuse Knox Coventry of crime. I swear that the time shall come when you will repent of this. But now—I demand once more to be permitted to go to the bedside of my father. I do not ask; I demand it as my right. Do you still deny me?"

Dr. Dairmid hesitated, a dark flush slowly creeping over his strong face, a perplexed look coming into his eyes as he stood before the pale, proud woman, pinching his lower lip nervously between his thumb and forefinger.

"Because, if you still deny me, I will try my utmost to alarm the servants," added Rena, pushing back her chair so that she could arise without coming into actual contact with his person. "Unless you have also exerted your authority in that direction, I think I can trust them to protect the rights of their mistress."

Dr. Dairmid bowed his head in token of submission, though he made no attempt to clear the way as he slowly uttered:

"I have done my duty, Miss Coventry, as far as you would permit. I have only to warn you that any unusual excitement may kill your father outright, or else send him back to lunacy."

He said no more, for Rena Coventry was not listening to him. She brushed her skirt aside as she darted past him to the door, only to recoil with a little cry as it swung open to reveal a tall, dark figure standing on the dimly-lighted threshold.

The figure of a woman—tall and supple in build, soberly dressed, with a cap of some soft gray material on her head, and glasses over her eyes.

"The patient is asking for you, doctor," this woman uttered, in low, yet peculiarly harsh tones, giving no signs of seeing the maiden.

"He is no worse, nurse!" hastily asked the physician.

"Better, I think. He also asked if his daughter was ready to visit him. What word shall I carry back, doctor?"

"Say that we are both coming, nurse," quickly added the doctor, as he moved forward and gently but firmly restrained Rena from springing past that almost ghostly figure. "For his sake, I beg of you, Rena!"

The nurse bowed stiffly, then turned away.

Dr. Dairmid said:

"Pardon me, if I have not sinned beyond all forbearance, Miss Coventry. You bear with you the power of life or death, remember! And for the last time I must remind you that unless you can retain your composure, I shall consider myself justified in using force to keep you from the bedside of my patient."

"He is my father."

If she could go through to the end with as much composure as she was now exhibiting; but that Dr. Dairmid knew was impossible.

"Do your best, my dear child," he murmured, giving her an arm as he slowly paced along the corridor leading to the sick chamber at the opposite side of the great house. "Prepare yourself to receive a great shock, though his face is not nearly so badly distorted as at first. And I hope to remove all traces in a short time, unless—if you are as true and loving a daughter as I've been led to believe."

A curious termination, one would think, but however much Rena Coventry might have marveled at another time, she gave no sign now. Possibly she never caught the meaning of his words.

Now that the last obstacle to seeing her father seemed removed, she had thoughts for noing outside of that. All else was banished from her mind.

It had been such a strange home-coming!

A telegram had reached her in St. Louis, where she was visiting a school-girl friend, bidding her return by the first train, as her father was seriously ill. Nothing more definite than that. And quickly as was the distance between the two river cities covered, the interval was one of almost unbroken torture.

Her love for Knox Coventry was all the more intense from his being her only surviving parent, and cold, stern, methodical as all his business associates found him, the now retired merchant had never turned a hard or unpleasant side toward her; they were more like brother and sister, than father and daughter.

She was met at the Union Depot by Dr. Dairmid, who hastily evaded her first questions, hurrying her into the carriage which bore them to the Coventry Place, on South Ninth street. And when the building was entered, and she was eager to reach her father's bedside, it was only to find herself restrained, kept almost a prisoner in her own chamber, denied all access to her loved one, until it seemed as though her overtaken brain must surely give way to that terrible anxiety.

That was more than four-and-twenty hours ago!

An age of fear, of haunting doubts, of angry rebellion against the man who dared deny her admission to her suffering parent.

To all, but the one answer: wait!

Only her maid, Clara Sandys, could be induced to give her any positive information; and Clara apparently knew so very little!

Only that Knox Coventry had been stricken with paralysis an hour before that imperative telegram was sent after his daughter. Only that their old family physician, Dr. Garfield, had been changed in favor of Dr. Dairmid. Only that the poor old gentleman was frightfully changed in face—"a sight to see, miss!" as Clara sobbingly declared.

And now—at last she was to see him!

She was just thinking this as Dr. Dairmid checked her at the very door of the sick-chamber, turning her pale face to the hall lamp, gazing keenly, almost harshly into her eyes, as he murmured:

"Remember! You hold the power of life or death in your hands, Miss Coventry! Remember—all depends upon you, now!"

"He is my father," was the sole response, as Rena twisted her arm from his fingers and quickly opened the door.

There was only a dim light in the sick-chamber, but its rays were sufficient to reveal that gray—almost white—head lying against the snowy pillows. Only so much, at first, for a white cloth was partly crossing the face of the sufferer, concealing nearly all else, aided by the long, patriarchal beard.

But at the sound of the opening door, slight though that was, the patient made a movement that caused the cloth to slip down, and Rena gave a quick, gasping breath of pain as she caught a glimpse of the painfully contorted face, the right side of which was drawn askew.

"Remember!" whispered Dr. Dairmid in her ear, as she briefly recoiled, inexpressibly shocked by that awful change in the handsome face she loved so passionately.

"Father—my darling!" the maiden softly uttered, gliding forward and dropping to her knees by the low bed, tenderly touching her blanched lips to that distorted cheek.

"Rena—forgive—pray for me!" huskily gasped the patient.

Despite her terrible struggle for composure, a low, choking sob rose in her throat, and her head bowed upon the cover. Dr. Dairmid caught her arm, almost angrily repeating his warning word, but it would have been better had he acted less promptly.

That touch, that voice, that hot breath upon her cheek, reminded the poor girl of all she had suffered of late, and with an almost fierce gesture she shook off that hand and faced him with flashing eyes.

"Touch me again at your peril, Dr. Dairmid! You have gone too far—you have overloaded my patience!"

"You are endangering the life of my patient by—"

"Your patient? Yours no longer, sir!" and Rena proudly faced the physician, waving him back with one commanding hand. "You are discharged from this instant. I will send for our own family physician, and—"

A hollow groan from the sick man cut her short, and Rena turned to see the nurse lightly hiding his painfully distorted face from view with the white cloth. As she did so, her free hand pushed the daughter back as she leaned forward, her tones cold and harsh, though so low:

"You are risking his life, miss. I must protest, as his nurse, against such rash disputes in his presence."

"Don't—don't anger—him, pet!" came brokenly from the sick man. "Pity—have mercy, Dairmid!"

Rena stood like one dazed, turning paler than ever as she distinguished these broken words. What did it mean? What could it mean?

Her proud, haughty parent begging mercy of such a man as this?

"You can take your hour now, Martha Prevost," coldly remarked the doctor, turning to the nurse, who silently courtesied in response, and as noiselessly left the chamber. "And you, my dear sir, may rest assured that your prayer shall be granted, provided Miss Coventry will permit me to make my word good, Miss Coventry?"

Rena started, brushing a hand painfully across her brows, but though she looked toward him, it may be doubted whether she so much as saw his face just then. For the moment she was completely dazed, utterly bewildered.

What frightful power did this man wield over Knox Coventry?

"More than once you have questioned my right to be here, Miss Rena Coventry. I hesitated to tell you why I came; why I am still here; but now I tell you that I came and remain because I alone of all the men in this world can cure your father! I alone can bring him back to life and health! I alone can restore him to life, or—"

"Or what?" mechanically murmured the frightened maiden, as the physician paused,

with a cold, hard, merciless smile upon his lips.

"Or send him to the gallows!"

CHAPTER IV.

DR. DAIRMID TIGHTENS HIS GRIP.

"SPARE her, if you can show no mercy to me, Dairmid!" hoarsely panted the sick man, causing the cloth to drop down upon his silvery beard as he moved his head painfully.

Although his words were directed to the man, his eyes—one so full of love, of remorse, of horror, the other almost closed by the contracting muscles of that side of his face—were turned upon the white, frightened face of his daughter. And, with a sobbing cry, Rena fell upon her knees at his side, her arms about his form, her cheek lovingly pressed to his, her tears dampening his pillow as she sobbed:

"I will not—he lies! Say that I may order him away, father!"

Knox Coventry only lowered his lids, moaning piteously. And as she heard this, a cold, sickening dread began to fill the heart of the poor girl. Why did he not join in her passionate denial of that base calumny? Why did he not give her permission to have the servants eject this abominable villain from the house?

Even then, with all those questions unanswered, the loyal daughter would not yield to conviction. Even then her love was proof against all doubts of her father's perfect honor.

"I will go—the instant Knox Coventry bids me depart."

Cold, measured, emotionless came the words. Dr. Dairmid stood with lightly folded arms, gazing from one face to the other, just the ghost of a smile playing about his strong mouth.

Quietly as he spoke, Rena's heart sunk lower than if he had broken out into fiercest defense. Despite her loyalty, she felt that he must have implicit belief in his own power, baseless though it would prove when all was made clear. And yet—

"Don't—don't anger him, Rena!" huskily breathed the invalid.

"Then I am to stay, Knox Coventry?"

"Stay—but have mercy!"

"And you, Miss Coventry?" mercilessly persisted the doctor, still in that cold, mechanical tone of voice, much as though a machine was articulating the words. "Do you still command me to leave your presence and your house? Shall I go—to send a substitute?"

There was no response. Rena still clasped the trembling form of her father in her arms, still pressed her cheek to his; but her eyes were closed, and there was a horrible grip tightening upon her heart. It seemed as though she must perish under it, and for a brief space she felt herself hoping that the end might come thus.

For she could no longer doubt, though her love seemed but increased by that terrible conviction. If that merciless villain was lying, as she had so loyally maintained, would Knox Coventry ask for mercy, while bidding the man who so deeply insulted him stay?

For a little while Dr. Dairmid was silent, as well, intently watching his victims, as though wishing to make sure his victory was complete before taking another step. Then he deftly resumed his professional manner and voice, gently touching Rena on the shoulder:

"You are undoing all my skill has wrought, so far, dear child, and though I can, as a physician, make all due allowance for a daughter's grief and anxiety over a loved parent, I must insist on your controlling yourself better, under penalty of banishing you from the sick-room. You agree with me, I trust, Mr. Coventry?"

"Anything, only—get it over quickly!" panted the invalid.

With a noiseless step, Dr. Dairmid brought an easy-chair from a corner, placing it a little distance from the bed, but in such a position that father could see daughter without the effort of turning his head or eyes.

"You will find it easier sitting than kneeling, dear child," he spoke softly, just touching the maiden on an arm with a finger-tip. "Oblige me! For your father's sake, remember."

Rena shrunk from that touch, light as it was, and clung still more closely to her father in silent misery.

No words could fitly describe what she was suffering just then, even while the first terrible shock had in a measure benumbed her. And though she fought against it with all her remaining powers of mind, a hideous picture kept floating before her: a gallows, such as she had once noticed in a paper, but with her idolized parent standing in the place of the wretched criminal. With horrible clearness she could distinguish his every feature. And in his eyes was a terrible reproach; they seemed to be saying his death must lie at her door!

And grinning over the shoulder of her father was the pitiless face of Dr. Dairmid, the death-hood in his hands, hovering above the head of the doomed man. And from his lips seemed to come the words:

"Under the shadow of the gallows! And you could have taken him away from a shameful death to complete safety!"

Dr. Dairmid drew back, forcing a smile, but

with his dark eyes filling once more with that ugly reddish light. He had thought the victory all but won. Was it all to do over? Was he to be baffled in the end by this weak woman?

"Will you add your wishes to mine, Mr. Coventry?" he coldly uttered. "Will you beg your loving daughter to be seated? You are suffering too much for—"

"I am in Hades!" hoarsely uttered the sick man, turning his face away from both daughter and enemy. "Go, Rena, pet! Do not anger him—for my sake, if not for your own!"

Stunned, stupefied, feeling like one shut out from all light now that her father turned from her of his own accord, the poor girl rose blindly to her feet. Yet she shrunk from the guiding touch of the doctor, even brushing his white hand aside, then sinking inertly into the chair.

Though the invalid had spoken with greater force and clearness than at any time since that painful interview began, Dr. Dairmid bent over him with undisguised anxiety. He tested his pulse, then poured out a few drops into a spoon, gently urging Coventry to swallow the dose.

"Is it poison, curse you?" almost fiercely panted the sick man, but turning his head and taking the potion, muttering huskily as he drew the cloth once more about his marred cheek: "I almost wish it was!"

Dr. Dairmid ventured a low, soft laugh, then said, smoothly:

"Another hand than mine must offer it, then, dear sir. You are far too valuable a patient for me to wantonly lose you—just yet!"

There was a sudden and ugly change as he added those two little words, and with a hollow groan Knox Coventry shrunk deeper into bed. It needed no more than that to prove how completely this cold-blooded schemer had drawn him into his power.

The doctor turned toward Rena, folding one arm, his hand supporting an elbow, fingering his under lip, a favorite attitude of his. She felt his steady gaze, but would not lift her eyes to meet it. They were fixed almost piteously upon the half-hidden countenance of the sick man.

"What shall I say to you, Rena?" the doctor uttered, at length, his tones grave, almost sad, it seemed. "It is hard enough at the best, and you are making it still harder. Have you no pity?"

"And you?" asked Rena, her tear-dimmed eyes flashing vividly as they met his for an instant.

"I am pitying—myself," with a little bow, and a faint smile that was hidden by his white hand. "After all, it must be told, and waiting longer will hardly make the truth any more palatable to either of us three. Did you speak, Mr. Coventry?"

It was only a smothered groan of pain or mental agony. It was not repeated, and Dr. Dairmid resumed in a colder, less emotional tone:

"It will hardly be all news to you, Rena Coventry, since you are a woman, with all a woman's insight and instincts. *I love you!*"

It was a confession in perfect keeping with all that had gone before. Cold, hard, emotionless. Not the faintest indication of the volcanic fire which lay smoldering fiercely, ominously under that crust of trained composure. Only a slightly deepened glow in those big black eyes; nothing more.

Rena Coventry shivered as the words smote upon her ears. *Love?* And that ice-blooded monster? It was worse than profanation of a holy term!

"You have it all in those three little words, Rena," still in that cold, measured tone of voice. "I love you! A single breath is sufficient to give them birth, but an eternity would be all too short in which to completely define what they mean, to me."

"And I—hate you even more intensely than I despised you at first sight!" flashed the maiden, with sudden energy. "I loathe you!" and she sunk back into her chair again with a shiver as a faint moan came from the bed of the invalid.

Dr. Dairmid never flinched. He even smiled slightly as though rather pleased than otherwise at having aroused her even thus far.

"And I—have loved you as man seldom has loved before, ever since we first met each other," he evenly resumed. "I fought against it until I saw how fruitless that was. I told myself that I was worse than an idiot to couple love and myself together, even in my dreams. I knew that you more than disliked me. I believed that you hated me. I was too proud to even think of being despised; no one worth calling a man can ever fall so low as that!"

"If anything could have saved me, the knowledge that your heart was given to another man must have done so. But that knowledge only seated my love more deeply, only made me think and plot and ponder the more persistently to displace or undermine Berry Barfort in your affections. You see," with a short, hard laugh, as Rena covered her face with her hands, "I am sparing myself as little as I am sparing you."

"And why should I spare either?" with the first approach to powerful emotion in his voice

as he took a single step nearer the cowering maiden, his hands reaching toward her as though longing to clasp her form tightly to his heaving chest. "Why should I keep on the mask which I have forced myself to wear through all these months? Why must I keep myself before your eyes as a block, a stone, a mere image of a man, instead of showing you how hotly the blood leaps through my veins?"

"Ren Coventry, I love you! I would tear the heart out of my breast and lay it throbbing at your feet to spurn, if by so doing I could make you believe in my love! I would rather die than cause you the slightest pang of pain, or—"

He stopped short as the maiden lifted her face, gazing steadily into his flushed countenance. There was such intense scorn in her eyes, and though never a syllable crossed her lips, he could only too readily interpret her meaning.

Only for a single breath did his confusion last. Then he was once more his former self, cold, emotionless, a man of marble so far as outward seeming went.

"Yet I am simply uttering the truth, my dear child, though you believe it not. I do not blame you so much, after what has transpired since your beloved parent's stroke. I have given you pain, but not because pain was my own choice; because I could never hope to win and wear you without."

"You! I would die ten thousand deaths, first!"

Dr. Dairmid permitted the ghost of a smile to flit across his swart face before replying:

"Unfortunately, dear Rena, it is not your own life or death that hangs in the balance. I believe you would die—women are curious creatures, after all! But—what of your father?"

"You dare not harm him, even if you have the power," retorted Rena, trying nobly to maintain her steadiness, but with poor success. "Even, do I say? You have no such power! You are lying, from first to last!"

"Harsh words from such sweet lips, little woman," returned Dairmid, softly. "Lips that should deal no blows harder than kisses; utter no sounds more harsh than sighs of love! And I have faith to believe that the day is coming when what I just uttered in clumsy jest shall prove sweetest earnest. I believe I can make you love me, even as I love you, my angel. And for such a delicious reward, I am content to wait and labor. I will give you time to consult your father before I come back for the answer which is to send me to Paradise or that father—to Gehenna by the hempen route."

With a curt bow, he turned and left the sick-chamber.

CHAPTER V.

A SHAPT THAT RANKLED.

As Berry Barfort showed unmistakable signs of recovering his scattered senses, Dan Dunn signed for the policeman to take the part of explanation on himself for the time being, the detective slouching his hat and keeping his face from the moonlight as much as possible without too openly betraying his intent.

This silent order was promptly obeyed, for the policeman seemed anxious to remove any unfavorable impression which his earlier conduct might have made on the detective; a fact which spoke volumes for Dan Dunn, by the way, for, as a rule, men of his guild and the gentlemen of the locust are hardly to be classed as brothers in love.

Whatever purpose Dan Dunn may have had in thus acting was foiled by the young fellow whom he had saved from the clutches of the night-hawks, who stubbornly objected to retracing his steps down Francis street, in which direction lay the Pacific Hotel.

"I'm all right, officer," he declared, with just enough thickness of speech to brand him as partially drunk, though those heavy blows and subsequent blood-letting bade fair to shortly sober him off. "I'm going home. Any man's liar that says I'm drunk! Stubbed my toe on a banana-skin, I tell you!"

The policeman glanced toward the detective for further instructions, but none came immediately. Dan Dunn seemed irresolute, and Berry Barfort roughly jerked his arm free from the officer's grasp. A sharp pang from his lacerated scalp gave his buzzing brain a new turn, and he seemed to suspect these men of being enemies, possibly the thugs from whom he had so recently escaped.

"Aha!" and he aimed a blow at the face of the half-laughing policeman. "You're after the boodle I pulled out of Fatty Argyle, are ye? Well, here's your change—hot from the mint!"

The policeman nimbly dodged the blow, and Berry Barfort swung around to send its mate at the second of his supposed assailants. Dan caught the first in his hand, holding it powerless while he pushed back the brim of his hat, baring his handsome face to the moonlight.

"You don't really want to slug me, Mr. Barfort?"

The young man stared, brushing his free hand across his face as though to clear his brain of cobwebs. That face was not an altogether strange one, yet—

"What's the last word from Eric Alvord and his pretty wife, Berry?" added the detective, with a soft laugh as he released that unclosing fist. "You haven't forgotten them, if you have me, surely!"

"David Testivan!"

"Then, but no longer," swiftly amended the detective. "I'm just plain Dan Dunn to my friends; and you two gentlemen are included in that list, I trust?"

"Mighty proud of the chance, sir," nodded the policeman.

"Thanks. I'll look you up when off duty, pardner. Just now—will you take a little walk with me, Barfort?"

"To the world's end, if you say so," was the prompt response.

"Only as far as the Pacific. Good-night, officer. If any fellow comes to ask your advice over a broken pate, tell them to try a hair of the same dog, and direct them to Room 41, second floor, south!"

Dan Dunn locked arms with Barfort, and the two men walked down Francis street, to the corner of Third, where stood the hotel at which the detective had a room. The policeman followed them at a respectful distance, to make sure no further attempt was made by the night-hawks. But his services were not called for, and as the two men ascended the steps under the heavy portico, he turned away to walk his beat and keep a watchful eye open for the two thugs who had dared insult him by assailing a gentleman within his territory.

The hour was quite late, and there were no guests in the office. Dan Dunn asked for his key, passed a careless word or two with the night-clerk, then led Barfort up to his room, performing all so cleverly that the blood-marked face and disordered clothing of his friend passed unobserved by the young man on duty.

A few minutes later the twain were seated in comfort, each with a lighted cigar, taken from a neatly-embroidered case which the detective carelessly dropped on the white counterpane—a fact of which he was hardly conscious at the time, but which was destined to prove of strong significance ere the end.

Berry Barfort had washed his face and arranged his soiled garments. Dan Dunn had deftly attended to the cuts in his scalp, pronouncing them nothing serious, though he might have to be careful about donning his silk hat for a day or two.

"Then it really was something more than a slip and a fall?" hesitated the young man, his face flushing a bit as he added: "I had a little load on, you know, and— Well, what's the odds?"

There was no immediate response. The detective sat steadily gazing into the face of the man whom he had saved from robbery, if no worse, his own countenance grave and almost stern.

Under ordinary circumstances it was a face pleasant to look upon, for Berry Barfort was a more than ordinarily handsome man; but just now he wore a gloomy, almost sullen expression, as though life had little worth battling for.

A little above the medium height, with a well-proportioned form, giving evidence of no mean degree of muscular powers, yet not too heavily built for activity. His hair and thick mustaches were dark brown, almost chestnut in color, but looking black in the gaolight. His eyes, now downcast and veiled, were of the same hue, large, bright, lively as a rule. His age was probably seven or eight-and-twenty.

As the policeman had intimated, he was head-bookkeeper and cashier in a wholesale house on Third street.

The man who was sitting opposite Barfort also deserves more than a passing notice.

Dan Dunn had called himself David Testivan as Barfort had addressed him. He was tall, if full six feet may be considered as such. His broad shoulders, rounded chest, thin flanks, long limbs and small extremities, were those of an athlete of the higher class, combining great strength, activity and endurance. His proportions were just, therefore he was easy and graceful in all his motions.

His features were strong, yet clear-cut and regular; his skin smooth and pure as that of a maiden, yet with a healthy tinge of the sun that seemed to shine through his gold-yellow hair, his mustache and imperial. His eyes are not so readily described. Just now they seemed blue as the summer sky. At other times they were steel-gray, as hard, as cold and unyielding.

His garb was plain, of good material and business-cut. He wore no jewelry, beyond a slender gold chain to his watch.

These two men had met on only one occasion before this night, to their knowledge. That was in the sister city at the mouth of the Kaw, and at a certain wedding which, as the more important parties therein declared, would never have come about only for the good services of Dan Dunn, the self-styled cowboy.

"You asked about Eric Alvord," abruptly remarked Berry Barfort, with an evident effort to cast off his gloomy thoughts. "He was well, when last I saw him. So was his wife,

Linnet. They asked particularly about you; had I seen you? Could I give them any idea whither you had taken yourself? and only forestalled me in asking the same questions."

"I owe them thanks for the remembrance," gravely responded the detective, a softer light coming into his eyes for the moment. "But if I am to meet them soon, I trust they will not ask me about you!"

Barfort flushed, his brows contracting, for he could not mistake the meaning underlying this speech. It stung him, coming from one who was little more than a stranger.

"Awfully cheeky, am I not?" with a faint smile, leaning across the little table to gently touch the arm of the other—a little action, but it brought their eyes together. Barfort saw only sincere regard in those of his rescuer, and his own better nature asserted itself, at once.

"I know what you mean, Dunn," he said, soberly. "You think I'm going down hill, and I don't know but what you're right!"

"Down brakes, pardner!" with a soft laugh. "If that won't serve, try a rough-lock on each wheel. It's well worth the trouble, isn't it?"

"I'm not so mighty sure of that," was the gloomy response. "I'm not so sure I'll even thank you for chipping in when those rascals had me foul. It would have been over by this!"

"Don't you think you're trying to crowd all eternity into a very small compass, pardner? Over—so far as *this* life is concerned, perhaps; but is there nothing *beyond*?"

"I know I've found my hell on earth," was the curt response.

"I saw you in the ante-room," adroitly shifting ground as he saw that he could make no impression, as yet, in the former direction.

"You mean that you saw me at Argyle's?"

Dan nodded assent.

"I saw you, and saw how keenly you clipped the claws of the rampant jungle king, too. Do you often hit 'em so heavy, pardner?"

Berry laughed harshly as he retorted:

"Did you ever hear the old saying: 'Unlucky with woman, lucky with cards'?"

"I heard a saying this same night which made a deeper impression on my mind," was the grave response. "Shall I tell you what it was?"

"If you think it worth while. I have no choice either way."

Dunn smiled faintly at this, but for all there was a look of anxiety in his honest eyes as they rested on that moody countenance.

"Never mind what led me into the bar, under the gaming-rooms at Argyle's. It was not wholly to quench my thirst, though I did the customary, of course. Enough that I was in there, and that I caught some words dropped by a couple of gentlemen who evidently knew you."

Barfort started, lifting his eyes, but said nothing as he waited.

"That was what first attracted my attention—your name. It looks rather cheeky to say as much, but up to that moment I had forgotten that such a personage lived in St. Joseph as Berry Barfort."

"What did you hear?"

"After your name, a hint that you were playing the high roller, up-stairs. Then one of the gentlemen shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Rather *their* bookkeeper than mine. I'll take evens that there will be another emigrant bound for Canada inside the year."

Distinctly Dunn repeated these words, gazing into the flushing face of his friend. Barfort tried to laugh, but it was a failure, and his tones were husky and unsteady as he asked:

"Anything more?"

"The bet was not accepted."

Barfort shrank as if from a blow, as the detective quietly spoke that brief sentence. Then his face paled and his eyes glowed as he leaned across the little table, squarely meeting that gaze.

"What impression did all this leave on you, Mr. Dunn?"

"Hardly an agreeable one, when I remembered that my best friend called you his friend; his wife also regards you highly."

"And you think I'm going to the devil as fast as hard drink and high play can drive me?" with a laugh that brought a still graver shade to the face of the detective. "Maybe so; I'll not take the trouble to deny it. And yet—man!" with a sudden outburst of mental pain. "Can't you see it? Can't you see that it's more than love of drink or lust for gold that is driving me on the rocks?"

"I see that you are in trouble, and I know that I'd dearly like to help you out of it. But—I can't do much without your own help."

CHAPTER VI.

DAN DUNN TAKES A SNAP-SHOT.

At those words Dunn reached across the table, silently inviting Berry Barfort to clasp the hand in good fellowship.

The offer was not accepted at once. Shaking his head, the young man, his brain still dizzy from the injuries he had received, sunk his chin upon his chest, staring at vacancy.

The Soft-Hand said nothing. He knew that

to press matters would only result in harm, and leaning back in his chair he watched the tiny circles of blue vapor floating upward in the gas-light.

Though the hour was late, he had no pressing business on hand, and was content to wait for what, he felt confident, would come, sooner or later. And he was right.

Berry Barfort was young enough to feel the need of a strong man to lean upon, and from what he had learned from his friend, Eric Alvord, a rising young lawyer of Kansas City, he knew he could find none more capable than this same detective; such from choice, as he knew.

"Tostivan—Dunn, if you'd rather," he abruptly exclaimed, leaning upon the table and gazing steadily into that cameo-like face.

"Dunn goes, pardner!"

"I don't like to pour my troubles into the ear of a stranger—"

"You're Alvord's friend; and he is my heart-brother."

The face of the young man brightened at this quiet interruption. It was just what he needed to fully open his heart, and he no longer felt that he was talking to a stranger. Just then it seemed as though they had known each other intimately for years and years!

"I don't want you to think worse of me than I deserve, though the best is bad enough, Heaven knows!"

"Then it's time for a change, don't you think, pardner?"

"If it isn't too late! But, I'll make a clean breast of it, and at the end I'll ask your opinion. It's just this way, you see:

"Like all other young men, I take a drink occasionally, and I play a little at odd spells. Not because I love liquor, for I hate it! Not because I'm so anxious to make a rich stake, for I'm sensible enough to know that more goes over the table than ever comes back."

"Then there's hope in oodles for your pardner!" laughed Dunn.

"I should have said that I once did this; for more than a year I have never touched liquor nor bet on a card—until this night."

"Why this night in particular, pardner?"

"Because I was mad—because I had to have some sort of excitement or blow my brains out!" almost fiercely ejaculated the young man. "Let me tell you—don't make it come any harder by chipping in, I beg of you, for it's worse than drawing teeth as it is!"

"Not for one year, I said. That was when I first met—when I first became acquainted with a certain young lady of this town," he added, in calmer tones, though his brows were contracted as in pain. "It was on her account that I swore off. Not, mind you, because she asked me, for she never knew that I had a bad habit. Just because I couldn't love her and gamble and drink at the same time."

"Then you have ceased to love the lady?"

Barfort flinched like one sharply stung, but passed the question by without a definite answer.

"Six months ago I plucked up courage enough to tell my love, and that night I felt the world all too small to contain me! And from that hour up to night before last, I would not have changed places with the richest, wisest, most powerful in all the land! You understand, of course? We were engaged to be married."

With strange moodiness came this announcement. The Soft-Hand kept silence. How could he offer his congratulations to a man who wore such a despondent face?

"Her father was rich, but I pledge you my word I never gave that a thought, though, as his only surviving child, I had often enough heard Re—the lady called an heiress. And I was so wholly in love that I never once stopped to consider how he would regard my suit, poor as I was and am."

"Who could be richer?" softly interrupted the detective. "The lady loved you, as you loved her. That made you on a par with her father."

"Well, I was kindly received, and after certain explanations which I hardly need enter on here, my suit was granted. Owing to circumstances over which none of us had full control, there was no definite period set for our marriage; but I was content without that."

"Well, I should remark!" smiled the listener, cordially.

"And a happier man never lived than Berry Barfort, up to— Let me tell you just how it all happened. Mr.—her father was suddenly taken ill; a stroke of paralysis, it was given out. His daughter was absent from town on a visit. A telegram was sent for her immediate return, though this I only found out afterward. Indeed, there was an air of haste and even mystery over the whole affair!" with a frown.

"Nothing in my line, of course?" ventured the detective.

Berry Barfort did not immediately respond. His face was filled with conflicting doubts. Dan Dunn's interest began to take another shape, but when the young man spoke, his face altered again:

"No, I don't mean that. But let me tell it after my own fashion, and you can then give your decision:—

"I was very busy, closing up my books for the half-year. I did not hear of this sudden sickness until the next day after it happened. Then I hastened at once to his house, to offer my services, but I was denied admittance!"

"By his orders?"

"So I was told, but I doubted it then; I know now it was a lie! I know that a cunning, cold-blooded devil in human guise kept me out! I know— Listen to what happened afterward, and then judge for yourself."

"That same evening—day before yesterday, if you count this a new day—his daughter reached home. I heard of it shortly afterward, and of course I called at once, never doubting but what I would be received for a few moments, at least. Instead—her maid checked me, and said her young mistress was too deeply agitated to see even me."

"What could I do? I left a line on a card, saying I would call again in the morning, and went my way."

"I did call, and not once—for then the footman told me his mistress was still abed, after a bad night with her parent—but twice; and for the third time I was denied admittance. This time it was by the physician in attendance, not the old family doctor, but the ice-blooded scoundrel of whom I spoke a bit ago."

"I wanted to knock him down, and I'm only sorry now that I didn't yield to the impulse! Only the memory of a sick man above prevented me from doing it right then and there."

"I asked after the invalid's health. It was about the same. I asked if his daughter was able to see me for a moment, and he shook his head. I was going to brush him aside, when he closed and locked the door in my very face!"

"Pretty tough, wasn't it?"

"I swallowed it, because I couldn't break down the door, with a seriously ill man lying within earshot. And—well, I was taken all aback, as you may imagine. I was stupefied, I reckon!"

"Just after noon I called again, and again I was met by that infernal doctor who barely showed his nose through a narrow crack in the door. No, I could not see the lady. She was quite ill herself, and had positively forbidden any admittance whatever! I gave my name, though I knew the rascal recognized me, but it was the same thing. Positively no callers admitted. And the door closed. And from beyond it I distinctly heard that devil laughing! And—as Heaven is my judge!" as he brought his clinched fist heavily down on the table between them; "I believe that I could distinguish her laugh mingling with his!"

The detective was startled, and could not help showing as much by his change of countenance. Whatever else he may have expected, it certainly was not this.

"You are sure of this, pardner?"

"As sure as I can be of anything which did not happen right under my own eyes," was the gloomy response. "I could almost make oath I heard her sweet voice mingling with his!"

"Almost—but not quite! That's all the difference between heaven and its antipodes, pardner, and if I were in your place I reckon I'd try to bring the certainty around on the other side of the pole. If you don't, what must you believe? That the young lady has not only ceased to love you, but that she is literally heartless; else how could she laugh in the hall, while her father was dying in the chamber?"

"Haven't I asked myself the same thing, ten thousand times over?" almost savagely demanded the lover, his face darkening, his eyes aglow. "Didn't that very doubt drive me into making a dog of myself this very night? It did! I had to do something to keep from thinking, for that could only end in driving my brain wild. And so—well," with a hard and reckless laugh as he added: "Fatty Argyle's coffers had to suffer, though I only know it from the fact that those two thugs took the trouble to follow after me. I could almost wish they had done their job up a little quicker—before you had time to chip in, Dunn."

"After all, pardner, you're not half the gambler those fellows at the bar fancied you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say, Barfort," with a faint smile. "A thoroughbred gambler never gives up a stake until it is won beyond all dispute. A true blood will not throw up his hand while there is even the ghost of a chance left for turning a trick. But you—you seem ready to throw up every claim to the prize—and such a glorious prize, too!—the moment your antagonist says he's got an invincible hand."

"What more could I have done?" gloomily asked Berry.

"Demanded a sight for your money, of course," laughed Dunn.

"It's easy to talk, but you're not in my place," protested Barfort, seeming to take a gloomy delight in looking at the darkest side of the picture. "If you were—curse it all, man!" flashing out hotly. "Do you know what all this means? Can you even begin to realize—just think of it a minute, will you? Denied admittance, not once but repeatedly, and I engaged to marry the girl. Think of it!"

"And you think of it, in another light, pard-

ner," returned the Soft-Hand, growing grave and earnest once more. "Try to think that all's not near so black as your hot temper has painted it. Try to think that your own ears deceived you. Try to think of the daughter closely confined to the bedside of her suffering parent, never knowing that you had asked to see her, never having time to think of aught but her sick, perhaps dying parent. Try to think all this, and then ask yourself how little true manhood you have shown in filling yourself with bad whisky and worse than wasting your hours over the gaming-table. Try to think of all this, my dear fellow, and, my word for it, you'll end a mighty sight wiser than when you began."

Dunn ceased speaking, not because he had no more to say, but because Berry Barfort bowed his head on his folded arms as they rested on the little table between them, his whole frame trembling with powerful emotion.

For a few moments the detective watched that bowed head, his eyes beaming softly, his face wearing almost a tender look. Then a change came over him, as sudden as it was complete, though nothing of this was visible to outward inspection.

His trained ears caught a faint sound just outside the chamber door, and though his back was turned that way, he knew that a spy was crawling up to the open transom. And a few seconds later he said:

"Barfort, what if I was to show you good cause to suspect a plot?"

Swift as thought he turned on his seat, his right hand armed with a revolver, at the report of which a sharp cry rung through the house!

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW OF THE GALLOWES.

THE instant Dr. Dairmid crossed the threshold and closed the door of the sick-chamber behind him, Rena Coventry sprang forward and turned the key in its wards.

With a gasping breath of relief she turned toward the bed, to see its occupant apparently struggling to rise, one trembling hand stretched appealingly toward her, the other lying as though already dead at its owner's side.

"Papa!"

"Don't—I thought—"

In an instant Rena was at his bedside, gently lowering that silver-crowned head to its pillows, frightened by the awful distortion of the face whose every line and feature she so revered, for the moment forgetting her own tortures: only to have them recalled by the broken speech which came from those quivering lips.

"I thought—I feared my little girl was running away—from the miserable sinner who—"

Her lips touched his, checking his words. She tried to smile, to answer him soothingly, but in vain.

A sound from without startled them both, and half-expecting an assault upon the locked door, Rena turned her head to glance in that direction. And as she did so Knox Coventry huskily murmured:

"If it's only he! If he's only fallen downstairs to break his neck! Pray for it, Rena! Pray that the foul fiend may claim his own before Craig Dairmid can return to— Ah!"

A sharp spasm of pain seemed to cut his fierce appeal in two, and under cover of this the poor daughter strove hard to become composed. It was hard, for the manner and speech of her father lent color to the terrible accusation hinted at by Dairmid!

By signs rather than words the invalid made her comprehend his meaning, and Rena brought the remedy he required from the little nightstand near at hand. The directions written thereon told how much to administer, and, despite her shaken nerves, Rena literally obeyed.

She held it to his lips, and their gaze met. She tried to force a smile, but it was a piteous failure. Knox Coventry must have read something of all she was suffering, for his own eyes closed and he averted his face with a low-sound that was born of remorse rather than weakness or pain.

He felt blindly for the cloth used to conceal in part his distorted face, and in silence Rena guided his hand, then smoothed the white folds before lightly touching her cold lips to his forehead.

"He shall never return, father!" she forced herself to utter, in steady tones. "I will wait upon you. I will see that word reaches our true friends. And if he persists in intruding upon us, I will charge him with—"

Knox Coventry caught her wrist with his free hand, huskily muttering:

"No, no, you must not! It would—he would—"

The world seemed to stick in his throat, but Rena understood only too clearly what he would have said. It was true! That pitiless villain really held her poor father in his bitter grip!

With her last frail hope banished, Rena bowed her head on the coverlet, feeling as though death would be a welcome boon just then. She was poorly fitted to battle with such a crushing weight of shame and grief, after those long hours of sleepless anxiety and suspense.

"Rena, my poor wounded bird!" huskily muttered Coventry, his sound arm moving until

his hand rested lightly on her bowed head, even though his face was still averted. "And I am worse than powerless! I can't help you—I must wound you still more deeply! Oh, why did I not die when that sickening stroke fell upon me!"

"Don't, papa!" sobbed the girl—woman no longer, now that they were alone together. "Try to forget—try not to think of—"

She could not pronounce that name.

Knox Coventry seemed to gain in strength as his daughter fell off in hers, and though his tones were low and hoarse, so different from his old cheery, mellow voice before all this trouble came upon them, his sentences ran on without breaking for breath or pain, as before.

"If I only could, Rena, pet! If I only might forget everything save your true love and our past happiness. But, I can't. I must recall the bitter, black past, at least far enough to make you comprehend how completely I am in the power of—of Craig Dairmid."

Rena lifted her head, forcing back her tears, stilling her shaking nerves by a desperate effort of will. She bent over until she could meet that one opened eye, her own orbs filled with painfully eager questioning.

Knox Coventry flinched visibly, but managed to meet her gaze. And in his eye was something that told Rena her blind groping after hope was worse than useless.

Slowly she drew back, followed anxiously by her parent's eye, and the invalid gave a sigh of intense relief as he saw her pause at the easy-chair, to wheel it close to his side.

Pale, her face like a frozen mask of wax, Rena Coventry seated herself, taking the sound hand of the sick man between her own. He shivered involuntarily at the touch, for her flesh seemed turned to plastic marble. It was so cold, so lifeless!

"Father, you are strong enough to talk?" Rena asked, giving a little start at the unnatural sound of her own voice, but forcing herself to continue: "You can bear to tell me all, now?"

"And you, Rena? You can bear to listen?"

"I think so. I think I have already suffered all that a girl can suffer, and still live. It is not myself: it is your strength, father."

"All through me!" groaned the sick man, closing his eyes and turning his face away. "Why did I not die outright when this cursed stroke lay me helpless on my back?"

Rena sighed involuntarily. If death could be summoned at will, how much longer would she be drawing the breath of life?

"Tell me all, father," she forced herself to repeat. "Tell me everything, without reserve. The time for concealment is forever past."

"You will hate me! You will curse me, Rena!"

"Don't make my burden any heavier, father. You are my father, let what may come, and I love you—love and honor you despite all!"

There was a touch of fire in the conclusion, but Knox Coventry did not turn his face. He smothered a groan in its birth, and as though afraid to let the maiden say more, he huskily uttered:

"It is all true, Rena—all that merciless demon hinted at! He has me foul. He can spare my life, or he can send me to—to the—"

"When I have heard everything, I may believe that, but not before," bravely interposed Rena, as his voice choked. "Tell me what hold Doctor Craig Dairmid has over you, father."

"If it was only death, I wouldn't give it a second thought. I have only you to hold me back, Rena. Only you! And—if I had only acted promptly! If I had only improved the few moments granted me before this awful stroke fell!"

Rena shivered afresh, for she could not help catching his meaning.

"Would that have saved you, father? Would Doctor Dairmid have been content with your death? Would he not still have sought his revenge, on your memory, on me?"

"He would—he will!" with another half-smothered groan.

"Then why not pluck up courage and fight him to the bitter end?" cried Rena, her eyes flashing with brief fire. "I will help you. Together we may still baffle him!"

"You don't know him, child. You don't know how thoroughly he has spun his cunning meshes. I can't escape, save through—No, Rena," he added, with forced composure. "There is no hope, no escape for me, unless—Will you, can you save me, child?"

He turned his head, a wild light glittering in his one fully open eye, his face painfully twitching, his hand clutching her arm with marvelous force for a half-paralyzed man. His forced composure was gone. He seemed to have lost all feeling for his child, and to think only of himself, of his own danger.

"I cannot die! Save me, Rena, daughter! Save me from that monster! Save me from the—from such an awful, shameful death! See, I beg of you, my child, my poor little darling! Save me—for you can, if you will only—"

His voice choked, his face turned purple, an awful rattling rose in his throat. He released her arm to motion toward the restorative drops,

and Rena sprung to the little stand in breathless haste.

She thought he was dying, but even as the cry for help rose in her throat, she choked it down. He would come, and better death than his presence!

She did not stop to count the drops; what matter if a mistake should prove fatal?

Knox Coventry swallowed the potion, then lay still and motionless on his pillow, only the twitching muscles on his afflicted cheek telling of remaining life. And Rena stood beside him, silent, white as death itself, clasping his clammy hand.

If he died, she would follow him speedily. In the grave there was rest and oblivion. Craig Dairmid could not harm them there!

The poor girl had been so sorely tried; she was worn out with anxiety and loss of sleep, even before this last crushing blow fell. Little wonder, then, that such wild, unhealthy thoughts should run riot in her overtaken brain.

But the end was not yet. Knox Coventry pressed her hand as it clasped his fingers. A long breath caused his broad bosom to rise and fall. Then he spoke:

"Try to forget what I said, Rena, little pet. I was mad—I could only see my name—your name, and your sainted mother's name—dragged in the mire by that pitiless demon! Forget—I will not be so meanly weak again. I will—you shall not sacrifice yourself for such a miserable wreck as Knox Coventry!"

"If that would save you, father!" murmured the poor girl, scarce realizing how much her words might imply.

"Will you? Can you, darling?" panted Coventry, his eyes—for in his excitement the painful distortion produced by his stroke seemed to grow less and less—glowing with unusual fire, his breath coming quick and short. "Will it not be too hard for you? Can you bear with Craig Dairmid for the sake of saving my—our name from never-dying degradation?"

Then the poor girl realized what it all meant, and with a sickening pain tearing at her heart, shutting off her breath, she fell back, saved only from an ugly fall to the floor by the easy-chair.

Her eyes were open, but they did not see the awful change which flashed into the face of the man who so breathlessly begged her to submit to worse than death for his miserable sake. If her sense of hearing remained, it failed to record the despairing groan which welled up from that laboring chest. It was death in life!

How long this lasted Rena Coventry never knew, if she ever tried to recall it. While it did last, she was conscious of nothing that went on about her. She did not know that there was a sharp, impatient rapping at the door of the sick-chamber. And only when a voice—the cold, hard, hated voice of Dr. Dairmid—rang through the frail barrier, did she start into life and reason again.

To behold a hideously convulsed face, showing purple against the snowy pillows. To hear a horrible rattling as the sick man tried to fill his lungs with fresh air. And, believing her father was in his last throes, she sprung to her feet, screaming for help, and crying:

"Father—do not die—do not leave me thus! I will—I will save you, if I can, let the cost be what it may!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PITILESS AS FATE.

"RENA—Miss Coventry—open the door!"

It was the voice of Dr. Dairmid, stern and commanding, yet plainly excited to a rare degree for one of his habitual self-control, and his words were emphasized by the sharp rappings which followed.

"Would you have your father's death at your door, child?" he impatiently added. "Must I break the door down?"

Rena sprung across the chamber, turning the key and opening the door, to start back as Dr. Dairmid sprung across the threshold. Apparently he neither saw nor gave her a thought in his anxiety for his patient, for he was quickly leaning over the sick man, deftly affording him relief from that terrible suffocation.

Just what he did, Rena never knew. She sunk to the floor, her face bowed upon her trembling hands. She did not even know when Martha Prevost, the nurse, entered the chamber. She was stunned, broken down for the time being.

She shivered slightly as a firm but gentle touch rested on her shoulder. She shrunk back a little as she looked up to encounter the dark eyes of Dr. Dairmid, but she offered no resistance to his lifting her up and leading her to the easy-chair, once more pushed back from the bed on which Knox Coventry was lying so still and deathlike.

Only for his eyes. They were both open, the contortion almost gone from his face, now ghastly pale. His gaze followed her, and in his eyes the poor girl seemed to see a pitiful prayer that she might even yet save him from open disgrace, if not from death itself.

Perhaps it was this silent prayer that lent her

strength for what was yet to come. Perhaps she had already suffered all that a maiden could suffer, and no longer felt the cruel blows dealt her by this man who dared speak of his love!

Noiselessly Dr. Dairmid took up a position where he could view both his patient and his intended prize. For a few moments his dark eyes passed from one to the other, but always to linger longest on the pale, rigid features of the maiden.

If he did not love her, after his own fashion, then his dark eyes were admirably trained to flash forth lies.

Yet there was something of anxiety in them, though his face was like a waxen mask, so far as betraying emotion was concerned. It may have been that, as a physician, he feared what might lie behind that stony, unnatural calm. Would she come through the fiery ordeal with her full senses? Would her brain withstand such heavy and repeated shocks?

"Rena," he said, at length, his tones low but almost painfully distinct. "Miss Coventry."

Her eyes moved from the face of her father, meeting his burning gaze unflinchingly, showing that she heard if she did not reply in words.

"I wish to say, in the first place, my dear, that unless he receives another severe shock, your father will recover."

"For what? Better death—better a death like this, than on the scaffold!" painfully groaned the sick man, closing his eyes with a shiver.

"I trust it will never come to that, Mr. Coventry," responded the physician, never removing his gaze from the daughter's face. "It never will, unless—unless you so decide, Rena, my love!"

Even now the maiden did not reply or speak. She shivered a little as though in sympathy with the invalid, but nothing more. Noting this, Dr. Dairmid stepped forward, taking those white, cold hands between his, pressing them firmly and preventing their escape as Rena shrunk back, a tinge of color leaping into and out of her face.

"You must hear me out, Rena," Dairmid added, his dark eyes flashing with grim pleasure. "Too much has been said this night to let the rest go over for another day. You must hear my poor excuse, even if it cannot fully justify my conduct."

"I will hear you, Doctor Dairmid," mechanically answered the maiden, her eyes again meeting his without flinching. "Only release my hands. Your touch is disagreeable."

The villain dropped her hands, starting back, his swarthy face turning purple, for the words cut him more deeply than he had ever been stung in all his life. Nor did the uneasy murmur from the sick man serve to appease him, for he turned with an angry gesture:

"Hold your peace, Coventry! If this is your doing—if you have done or said aught to make your daughter hate me, I'll—"

"It is not hate, Doctor Dairmid," interposed Rena, still with that strange calmness, that impassive look upon her face and in her great eyes. "I think it is utter contempt. You are far too low and degraded for a lady to hate."

The man of evil quickly recovered his balance, and broke into a short, hard laugh. After all, was it not better so?

"Hatred or contempt, Rena Coventry, it proves that you can at least give me a thought. That is enough for a starter, and I have faith in my powers of pleasing to feel your scorn will eventually change to undying love."

"If I thought so, I would wonder why life was given me."

"To bless my life, little lady!" he cried, coming forward and once more taking possession of her hands.

"I am still in ignorance of all that may have passed between you and your father, Rena. I do not know whether or no he told you that I hold his life in the hollow of my hand—that with a single word I can hurry him to the gallows, to die a death of shame!"

"He told me that, but I know you are speaking falsely. He is my father. I would not even take his oath that he could be guilty of a capital crime."

"Have it that way if you can draw any comfort from it, Rena," with a faint smile. "I'm only too willing to pass it over without entering into details. I will pass it over for all time, if you are wise and daughterly enough to pay me the price I demand for my silence."

"And if I refuse?"

"If I fail to shake your refusal, your father shall die on the gallows! I will bound him to the doom his crimes so richly merit! I will show him as little mercy as you are now showing my love."

"For I do love you, Rena, darling," with a sudden change of tone as he sunk on one knee before her chair, still keeping her hands tightly clasped within his own strong palms. "I have loved you ever since we first met, and with growing strength with each day that rolled over my head, until now—now I love you so completely that, even to win the empty joy of calling you wife, I am lowering myself as an honest man was never lowered! I am branding myself a dastardly scoundrel, rather than

see you become the happy wife of another man!"

"Scoundrel! Villain! Degraded wretch! Is there no more fitting term?" coldly uttered Rena Coventry. "Then why try to show me how deeply you have fallen? Words alone are unable: only your own conduct."

If she would only burst out into passionate resistance! If she would weep, wring her hands, struggle against his power, though never so hopelessly! Anything would be preferable to this corpse-like composure.

So Dr. Dairmid felt, and it was only by an actual effort of will that he refrained from striking back in his puzzled awe. For awe it was, and he could not deny the fact.

Only his steel-like nerves kept him from utter defeat just when he had felt victory was fully assured. Not one man in ten thousand could have so adroitly concealed his discomfiture, but Craig Dairmid was no commonplace villain. In his way, he was an artist.

"We can agree on one point, then," and he forced a smile. "I am a miserably-degraded wretch. No one can so fully realize this as myself. But, what other course is there open to me? If I acted the gentleman never so perfectly, would I ever stand the ghost of a chance to win your love? You know I never would! You know that by any less heroic means I could never win from you the empty title of husband."

"Are you so sure you can win even that?"

"As sure as mortal man can be sure of aught in this world," was the prompt response. "I might fail were you alone involved, but I will win you through your love for your father—the father whom I can leave to die in outward honor and respect, or send to the grave of—Pardon me, Rena," bowing his head over her hands, dropping a burning kiss upon them before adding: "You are driving me mad with your icy coldness! Have pity on me, my love, my idol!"

"You are showing such mercy to him!" with a flash of emotion, as she jerked her hands from his momentarily relaxed grasp, pushing her chair back a little, but making no effort to arise.

Dr. Dairmid arose to his feet, putting his hands behind him as though the better to resist temptation. His flash was gone. His face was hard as of old, and there was no longer a sign of emotion as he spoke again:

"You are right and I was wrong, Rena Coventry. It is too early in the game to think of kisses, though they shall come in good season. Until then, I will control myself, content with knowing that, flutter as you may, you can never escape my power save over the disgraced grave of your parent."

"I have said enough to show you my power. I have pointed out the only method through which you can preserve the life of your father, and keep the name of your sainted mother from awful disgrace."

At that title the unnatural composure of the poor girl gave way, and with a sobbing groan she sprang across to the bed, sinking on her knees and pressing her now burning lips to the pale face of her father.

"Spare her, you demon!" groaned Coventry, winding his one well arm about that pitifully shivering form. "You'll murder her, too!"

"She will be all the better for this," coldly retorted the doctor, viewing the case from a medical standpoint. "I wanted to break that unnatural calmness. If I had failed, she would have been worse than dead before the dawning of another day. Now—she will be ready to listen to reason in the morning."

"Let it go over until then, Dairmid," faintly muttered the sick man. "I can't bear much more excitement."

"And your life is far too precious to me for idle sacrifice," returned Dairmid, with a heartless laugh, as he gently touched Rena on her bowed head, adding: "Miss Coventry, please try to compose yourself. I am about to summon your maid, to see you safely in bed. Of course you would not care to have her suspect aught of this?"

"Go, little pet," urged Coventry, pushing her away, but with a lovingly anxious light in his eyes as she lifted her head. "It is best so. Go, and try to sleep. Mayhap all will come out well, even yet."

"It certainly will, if Miss Coventry can bring herself to reflect dispassionately over the matter," said the doctor. "I will not press you too hard for an answer, Rena. I have waited for three years. I can wait a few days longer, knowing that the end will be my way. And harsh and cruel as I have been to you this night, my darling, believe me, I will never cease trying to make amends in the future—your future and mine, little woman."

He did not pause for an answer, but opened the door and called on Clara Sandys, Rena's maid, who was in waiting not far off. The maid came promptly, and the doctor slipped a little packet into her hand as he whispered a few words into her ear, unheard by the others.

He took Rena's hand, drawing it through his arm, after she stooped to press a kiss on the brow of her parent. He led her from the sick-

chamber, only parting from her at the threshold of her own room.

He laughed softly as the door closed and the key clicked in its lock.

"It comes mighty hard, but you've got to bend, my dainty beauty!"

CHAPTER IX.

A FREE-AND-EASY SPORT.

It was only a glimpse, but that was enough for eye so keen and hand so thoroughly trained as those of Dan Dunn. Only a glimpse of a coarse, brutal face at the open transom above the door, with little, bead-like eyes snapping and glowing as their owner spied upon the detective and his newly-met friend. But, brief as that glimpse was, Dan Dunn recognized Pony Keefe, the lesser of the two night hawks from whose evil talons he had rescued Berry Barfort!

The Soft-Hand's pistol exploded as it was swung upward, apparently without the slightest attempt at taking aim, but, with a wild howl of mingled fright, anger and pain, Pony Keefe lost his hold and tumbled to the hall floor.

Hardly less surprised was Berry Barfort, but, before he could do more than lift his bowed head, the Soft-Hand grasped him by the shoulder:

"Take it easy, pardner! Let that crook do all the hurry work!"

"Who was it? What?"

"Some fellow wanted to know who lived here, and I just sent him my card. I reckon—Going, eh?" chuckled the detective, cutting himself short as fresh sounds came from beyond the door.

Evidently the pistol-shot had alarmed the house, for cries and slamming doors were audible, more or less distinct; but Dan Dunn paid no attention to these. He was more closely interested in the movements of the eavesdropper.

He had not shot to kill, and so was not surprised to find how quickly the rascal recovered from his tumble from the transom. He heard him scramble to his feet, cursing and growling in his pain and anger.

Then came the sounds of spreading alarm, and the crook was still. Plainly as if he could see it all with his eyes, Dan Dunn knew what was going on—knew that Pony was listening to see if he had a chance to escape by the usual way.

"Go for him!" excitedly cried Barfort, divining a portion of the truth. "We can catch him if we try at once!"

"Not so mighty sure; but do we want to catch him?" asked Dan, his keen sense of hearing doing him good service just then, despite the sounds of his own voice.

He heard the door of the apartment adjoining his own open and quickly close again, with a slam that denoted more haste than prudence. As by instinct he divined the purpose of the crook, and still with hand holding Berry Barfort under control, he crossed over to the window.

"I marked our man for future reference, pardner, but if you'd rather trust your own eyesight, why—I reckoned that would be about the best of it!" with a soft laugh as he touched the catch and pushed up the window.

It was before the compulsory use of fire-escapes, so far as the city in the shadow of the Blacksnake Hills was concerned, but the hotel was partly supplied with tolerable substitutes in the shape of small iron-work balconies on the south face of the tall building, and one of these hung directly beneath the room from which the crook was now making his escape. And, as Barfort eagerly leaned out of the window, he caught sight of Pony Keefe just dropping over the edge of the balcony, to hang by his muscular hands an instant, then drop swiftly to the pave below as the bookkeeper uttered a sharp cry of excited anger at the prospective escape.

"He's got my mark, pardner," repeated the Soft-Hand, tightening his grip on the arm of his friend as he drew him back from the window. "I know where to look for him if I want him. Now—"

A hasty trampling along the corridor, then a sharp attack upon his door cut the detective short. He closed the window, hurriedly muttering to Barfort before answering the summons:

"Leave it to me, pardner. We don't want to tell everybody our secrets, do we?"

He turned the key and flung open the door, revealing both the landlords, neither of them fully dressed, so great had been their haste to investigate the cause of the unwonted disturbance.

"Who shot? What's the row, anyway?" spluttered "Uncle Jimmy" Cable, his close-cropped gray beard quivering as his jaws worked nervously, not from fear, but through pure excitement.

His partner, Price Wilkie, tall, portly, built on a grand scale throughout, never looking more handsome in his swarthy beauty than now, said nothing in words, but his dark eyes were eloquent enough for a dozen, despite the fact

of his vest hanging from one arm and his trousers being turned wrong side in front, upheld by a single suspender!

Dunn coolly faced the twain, backed as they were by a number of startled guests, as well as several of the house attaches.

"Any of you gents really smell powder?" he drawled, stifling a yawn which was a perfect counterfeit.

"I do, sir!" spluttered Uncle Jimmy. "Right here, sir! You've been trying to—what? Confound it, sir! I'll—I'll—"

"Then I reckon I'll have to play the immortal George," laughed the cool sport. "Yes, I did shoot off my little gun, though I hardly expected to flush so big a covey. Sorry to kick up such a rumpus, but—just charge it in my bill, please."

Uncle Jimmy could find no words suitable for reply, but Wilkie pushed him aside, his voice deep and even menacing as he spoke:

"This is a reputable establishment, Mr. Dunn, and no man can turn it into a free-and-easy while I'm at its head. Explain your conduct, sir, or I'll save the trouble of calling a policeman by pitching you neck and crop through the window!"

Dan Dunn turned to where the card of "rules and regulations" was fastened to the door, seemingly to make sure of his position, then said:

"I fail to find anything here that denies a guest the right to defend himself and property against the evil wiles of midnight thieves or assassins, landlord. And, really, don't you think it would be a little bit tough to spoil a window with a guest, simply for— Beg pardon, my dear sir!" with great anxiety as he pointed to the floor just without his door, where was visible a little pool of blood. "You'll soil your socks, if you ain't careful!"

Price Wilkie recoiled and Uncle Jimmy gave a snort through his little nose as he also noticed the telltale marks. Before they could say aught, the detective, having gained his purpose, quietly added:

"Jesting aside, gentlemen, I took a snap-shot at a rascal who was trying to crawl through the transom. I shot to scare, more than to kill, but maybe I hit harder than I intended. If so—doubtless you'll find the fellow lying round loose, somewhere."

Already Wilkie, still unconscious of what a peculiar figure he was cutting in his novel style of dress, was tracing the red marks to the door of the adjoining chamber, crying as he did so:

"Doctor Dairmid's room! Surely, it was not he!"

Without stopping to try the knob, he gave a thrust with his broad shoulders that burst open the door.

Dan deftly smothered the sharp ejaculation that leaped to the lips of his friend, at that name, drawing Barfort back from the open door to hastily whisper:

"Lock your tongue, pardner! Not a word while ears are so plenty! I'll explain when we're more alone."

The blood-drops were traced to the window, still raised, and Wilkie gave an angry cry as he found the little balcony vacant.

"Down and around, fellows!" he thundered to his employees, his big black eyes fairly aglow with energy as he came back into the chamber. "He couldn't have dropped so far without breaking a leg! Pick him up and hold him tight until— Well, if I ain't— And ladies, too!"

For the first time the big fellow noted his ridiculous manner of wearing his nether garments, and as a keen-eyed lady guest gave a little shriek of dismay at the sight, Wilkie dodged behind the door, begging his partner to clear the corridor.

This was quickly done, though more through the rumor of a dead or crippled thief lying on the pavement below than through the nasty efforts of genial Uncle Jimmy Cable.

Neither Dan Dunn nor Berry Barfort joined in the rush, for they knew well enough that the wounded man was not so readily to be run down. And the detective closed his door before hurriedly explaining.

But before he had completed, Wilkie again pounded at the door, this time dressed with a little more regularity, to ask:

"You're sure—it couldn't be the doctor, think?"

"The fellow who mistook a transom for the door? Are your M. D.'s so awful hungry for patients as that comes to?" demanded Dan Dunn, his brows arching in innocent surprise.

"It's no matter for jesting, sir," frowned Wilkie. "That room belongs to Doctor Craig Dairmid. If it was really him you shot—"

"I haven't the honor of knowing Doctor Craig Dairmid, but if it was really that personage, he can save a fee by curing himself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I simply marked him for future recognition. I like a bold man, but there's such a thing as being entirely too cheeky. It struck me this was a case in point, and so—I shot an inch or two of his cheek away! If he—Doctor Craig Dairmid, or Doctor anybody else—kicks—"

up a row over it, just give him my address, will you, landlord?"

Feeling that he would gain little information from this free-and-easy sport, Wilkie hastened away and Dan Dunn reclosed his door.

"Of course it wasn't Doctor Dairmid, pardner, but I'm 'way off my base if that precious rascal hasn't had a finger in this little pie!"

"What? You know him?" ejaculated Berry Barfort, in surprise.

"I've heard of him before to-night, and I may say I like him precious little more than you do, pardner. Precisely, Barfort," laughing softly as his companion flushed hotly at the significance underlying those words. "I didn't care to let on at the time, but I had no difficulty in placing your impudent physician."

"Then you know—you guessed who I meant by—"

"Isn't it my business to know things?" still laughing, but in such a manner that the confused and bewildered lover could hardly take offense at either words or manner. "I know pretty well how matters are running, though there are a few points which would be all the better for a little more light. Maybe you can give me this, maybe you can't. And it may be that I can show you a thing or two."

He broke off abruptly as the sound of feet came echoing through the corridor. A frown darkened his handsome face, and he hurriedly muttered before going to the door:

"Let me do the engineering, Barfort. We've either got to get out of this, or postpone the explanation until the row cools off. If—What sort of chambers have you?"

"Quite enough. We can go there, if you like."

"Agreed. But don't let anybody else suspect it. I'll cover our tracks if a glib tongue can bring it about."

There was time for no further confidences, for Wilkie was once more at the door, nervously impatient to clear up the mystery for the good of his house. And, apparently, Dan Dunn had thought better of his first decision, for he joined heartily with the landlord in his denunciations and his wish that the impudent varlet should be brought to punishment.

"You see, landlord, it takes a good while to get my mad up to boiling pitch, but when the gauge does show that mark—go 'way trouble! Where's the porter? Call a bell-boy! I want a hack just as quick as the law allows! Confound such a town, anyway! Do you keep burglars on tap, landlord? Did I ring for one, say?"

Storming and fuming, Dan Dunn made his way down to the office, declaring that he would bring the rascal to justice if it took a leg, and as he hustled Berry Barfort into the summoned back he sternly cried:

"To Chief Croder's office! I'll put this thing through or bust!"

CHAPTER X.

DAN DUNN INSPECTS A PICTURE.

DAN DUNN and Barfort were soon in the hack, and it rolled rapidly away from the hotel, rattling and bouncing over the then ill-paved streets, making conversation anything but easy; yet Dan Dunn contrived to remark:

"The gang is pretty highly worked up over the row, but those I particularly wished to hear me say what I did, if any of them were about, could only judge from what they saw and heard."

"I hardly understand you," said Barfort.

"Say our curious caller was only one of a regular gang. Say some of his pals were lurking about to cover his flight, or to learn just how much we knew or what we intended to do. Say they heard me order coachmen to drive to the chief—I should say marshal, but let it go at that. Wouldn't they take a short-cut to his office if they wanted to learn more? Or wouldn't they cut after the fellow I marked, to run him out of the way of nipping and peaching?"

The Soft-Hand seemed to think his explanation sufficiently comprehensive, for he broke off, looking keenly out of the window, as though marking their course and progress. Berry sat opposite the detective, his head aching, his heart sore, his troubles coming back upon him with poignant force. Then he spoke:

"Must I take an open part in this, Dunn?" laying a hand on the detective's knee. "I'd rather my employers didn't hear all that has happened if it can be avoided."

There was no immediate response, Dunn still watching through the window, but as they sharply rounded a corner, he called to the driver:

"You needn't stop at the office, driver. Keep right on to the next corner, turn to the left, then drive to No. — Francis street."

Barfort uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"That's my boarding-place! How did you know?"

"Business, dear fellow," laughed the detective. "It's part of our trade, don't you know?"

"But why—"

"Can't you manage to puzzle it out by yourself, pardner? Because, if you've no serious objections, I want to do a bit of thinking my own self. Nothing so very mysterious, by the way:

simply to decide just how much I ought to tell you of my past work and future plans."

Though brusque, there was nothing in this at which Barfort could take offense, and giving over the vain attempt to solve the riddle, he sunk back in his seat, maintaining silence until the hack drew up in front of the number mentioned—one of a long row of brick buildings.

Dan Dunn spared the driver the trouble of opening the door, and as he slipped a bill into the ready palm, he whispered a few words.

"From even my wife, boss!" nodded the driver, hurrying away.

A few minutes later the two friends were seated in a small but comfortable room in the second story. Barfort was gazing curiously into the handsome face of the man opposite, trying to solve his doubts by the soft gaslight.

Dan Dunn saw as much, but he seemed in no haste to gratify his curiosity. His face was grave, and there was a slightly troubled look in his eyes.

"I can't help thinking there's more in this night's work than we see on the surface, Barfort," he at length observed, their gaze meeting squarely. "I can tell you something new, beyond a doubt, but can you reciprocate? That's what's troubling my brain just at present."

A hand crossed the table and joined that of the detective in a warm, earnest grasp. And there was deep emotion in the voice that said:

"Try me, Dunn. If I fail, be sure it will come through no fault of my heart or brain. You saved my life to-night—though that don't count for so mighty much!" drawing back with a hard, forced laugh that more clearly betrayed his wretchedness than groan or moan.

"I reckon I did, pardner, if I do say it myself. It was something deeper than mere robbery that led those two crooks to follow you from Argyle's to-night. I'll tell you what makes me think so, if—Barfort, give me your word to keep secret anything I may tell you! Until I give you leave to let the cat out, of course," with a faint smile.

"I give you my word, Dunn. I'd swear to it, if you'd rather."

"Your word is plenty, of course. Now—this Dr. Craig Dairmid is a new hand in the game, but I'm beginning to believe he'll turn out one of the most important in the whole pack!"

"You think—"

"I've seen him in mighty bad company, though I couldn't actually connect him with my game. On one occasion I saw him just parting from one of the thugs who tried to do you up a bit ago. And that brings me back to my proper starting-point. Somehow I'm all mixed up to-night."

Dan Dunn swiftly brushed a hand across his brow, as if to clear his wits. Then, leaning on the little round table between them, he said:

"You haven't forgotten the bit of detective work I finished off in Kansas City, just before Eric Alvord married Linnet Meredith? That was purely personal, as you know, and I simply mention it to explain why I have taken up the detective branch as a profession. The taste I got then, proved more than was good for me, perhaps. I didn't have to work, so far as money is concerned, and when I left Kansas City I never had the ghost of an idea of ever following the business as a regular thing. But when—it was down in St. Louis, by the way—I struck a fair clew to a certain gang of evil-doers, and the chief asked me to see what I could do toward breaking them up, the temptation proved too strong for me, and I regularly enlisted on the force."

"My clew brought me up here. I know that one section of the gang is working this town. Night Hawks, they are called, both in and out of their own circles. It is a wide-spread organization, with a good many sub-chiefs, but I firmly believe that the man who may be called the real head-center is now in St. Joseph. That belief has brought me here, as I hinted before."

"It was purely in the way of business that I called at the Argyle place to-night, where I chanced to catch your name, as I mentioned. And when I went up-stairs, I naturally looked for you."

"You know what drove me there," moodily muttered Barfort.

Dan Dunn nodded assent, but took no further notice of the remark.

"I saw that you were playing recklessly, though you were winning largely. I saw you drink far more than was good for a man who needed a cool head and clear wits to get away with his winnings. And I saw more than that, too!"

"I saw two ugly rascals watching you with mischief in their eyes. I knew them well enough to be pretty sure what would be the outcome. They both belong to the gang, unless I'm 'way off. And when they saw you pushing up your last bet—you said you were going to cash in when the deal ended, remember?—I saw them leave the house."

"You know the rest without telling. I saw nothing of them, when I struck the street, so I could only follow you and trust to luck to get in my work before they had time to lay you out. It was a little risky, I admit," with a short laugh, "but I didn't want to make myself any

more conspicuous than I could help, though I hardly think any of the gang suspects my being a detective."

"You know what followed. I might have joined you at first, seeing what happened after, but I couldn't know that. For the fellow who took the trouble and risk of spying upon us in my room, was one of the thugs who tried to rob you on the street."

Barfort started incredulously, but before he could speak, Dan Dunn abruptly changed the subject.

"Enough of that; what interests me more, just now—what sort of man is this father of your lady love, pardner?"

"What—I hardly follow you!"

"Who is he? What is he? Is his record perfectly square? Are you dead sure he has no awkward passages to cover in his past life?"

Barfort flushed hotly before those curt, blunt queries. Something akin to resentment shone in his eyes as he replied:

"What do you mean? There isn't a more purely honorable gentleman in town than—than the one you are alluding to!"

"Than Knox Coventry, you started to say," with a soft laugh.

"You know him? You know—confound it all!" with a laugh that was half anger, half embarrassment. "What don't you know?"

"That's precisely what I'm trying to find out," coolly. "Don't you fly off the handle too sudden, pardner. I know that he is reported ill, with a paralytic stroke. I know that he is reputed rich, and a retired merchant. And knowing so much, gained simply through business methods and by catching up each little rumor as it flies, it was easy enough to fill out the little blanks you left in your story. See?"

Barfort nodded assent, but plainly dissatisfied still.

"I had already marked Dr. Craig Dairmid down as a crook. I had some reason to believe him mixed up with the Night Hawks. And that is why, apart from friendship, I took such an interest in your troubles. And why, too, I asked you about Knox Coventry's past. For, unless he has fallen into Dairmid's grip in that way, I can't account for the doctor's actions as you detailed them."

Barfort rose from his seat, pacing back and forth, his head bowed, his brows contracted, his whole manner that of one fighting against strong doubts. Dan Dunn said nothing, his face grave and cold as he leaned back in his chair, waiting for the decision.

After all, why should he worry? Aside from pure friendliness, he could have no interest in the affair. And if Berry Barfort declined his help, he alone would be the loser.

The young man paused abruptly before a wardrobe, out of which he took a small morocco-covered book. With this in his hand he came back to the table, speaking rapidly:

"I was an idiot for taking offense, Dunn, but I never respected a man more thoroughly than I do Knox Coventry. Whatever devilry there may be at work—and I can almost take oath that Dairmid is playing some rascally game!—be sure Knox Coventry has no part in it."

"I never met the gentleman to my knowledge, pardner. My only interest in him comes through your story, and the fact that Dairmid has a position in his house. Let it drop if you prefer, right now and here."

"I'll tell you all I know about him and his affairs, since you've asked the questions," was the quiet response, as Barfort unlooped the cover, showing a small photograph album. "First: this is the picture of Knox Coventry. Is it that of a man with a secret? Is he one to be even suspected of having a blotted record?"

The book opened where a handsome, patriarchal face was inclosed, and the detective bent over it with undisguised interest, though his face, so far as expression was concerned, might as well have been a mask of marble. And as the detective gazed upon this, Barfort resumed his restless pacing to and fro.

What would he have thought had power been given him to read the workings of that brain, just then? Though no outward sign betrayed the fact, Dan Dunn's pulse was quickened, his blood tingling sharply. For in that noble countenance, as though through a thin veil, he was tracing the lineaments of the very man whose trail he had followed to St. Joseph! The very man whom he had good reason to believe stood at the head of the lawless gang known as the Night Hawks!

And yet—was it only fancy? Only a strong, yet misty, resemblance? Did the long, heavy beard make all the difference?

More to rest his eyes and clear them of a certain indistinctness, born of his painfully intent gaze, Dan Dunn softly turned over a leaf or two, choosing the moments when Berry Barfort had his back turned, intending to return to that puzzling face when his eyes were rested. But as a loose picture slipped from between two pages further on, an involuntary cry escaped the lips of the really startled detective, causing Barfort to turn abruptly with a sharp ejaculation.

"Beg pardon, old fellow," uttering the first words that occurred to him as he looked up to

note the flushing face of his friend as Barfort noticed the photograph. "It just slipped out by chance. Didn't know you were an admirer of the dizzy burlesque!"

"I didn't mean—I didn't know it was there!" hastily picking up the card. "It is the picture of Miss Coventry!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE NIGHT HAWKS' NEST.

DAN DUNN was not mistaken when he pronounced that rashly curious eavesdropper to be none other than one of the two Night Hawks who had so desperately assaulted Berry Barfort while on his way home after several hours of high and successful play at Fred Argyle's.

Pony Keefe caught a glimpse of the two faces at the opened window to his right, and naturally anticipating another shot or immediate pursuit on the part of the detective, he paused only long enough to let his body down to the full extent of his muscular arms, then let go to risk broken bones on the sloping pavement below.

He struck heavily, but saved himself from falling, though he gave a little shiver as he saw how narrowly he had escaped being impaled on the iron pickets guarding a sub-passage. And then, striking toward the river as the shortest route to darkness and a chance to throw pursuit astray, Pony Keefe made rapid time during the next few minutes.

It had all happened so suddenly that he as yet had no clear idea as to the nature of his hurt. He knew he was suffering sharp pains. He knew that he was bleeding freely, and he mechanically lessened the danger of being trailed by tightly pressing a large kerchief against the torn cheek. But as yet he could not say whether the ball had done more than make a flesh wound, or if his escape had indeed been as lucky as it seemed on the surface.

He crossed Second street, then cut over back of the Francis street depot, taking the railroad track for some little distance down the river-bank, before slackening his headlong pace enough to look whether he was being pursued too hotly for safety.

"I don't see nobody, but that devil—bad luck spill over me!" with a grating curse at the thought. "Who'd 'a' thought to see him turn up right here?"

The bare memory served to put wings to his heels, and Pony Keefe covered the next few hundred yards with even greater rapidity than he had recorded at the beginning of his flight.

He kept to the rails as long as that route afforded the greatest security against meeting a policeman, then veered to the right, following the curve of the river as near as practicable without losing too much time.

"Ef the devil does pull up nigh me, he's got to be more of a duck than I be afore he claps the nippers on!" doggedly muttered the thug.

Only a thoroughly desperate man would have entertained the idea even for an instant, with the Missouri at such a high stage, and the "taking-off place" located on the outer side of such an enormous curve, which would necessitate a fight against the swift current for at least two miles; but Pony Keefe was desperate while at his best, and doubly so now that he felt Dan Dunn was hot on his track.

"If it was anybody else! If it was jest a common man! But him—I'd rather hev a full-grown tiger at my back!"

The words came pantingly as Pony Keefe lay crouching in a water-worn gully leading to the river, one hand on his pistol, the other still pressing the blood-sodden handkerchief to his lacerated cheek. His low forehead and little eyes were lifted barely high enough to permit him to watch the course he had taken while catching breath for another burst. Each minute of grace was giving him back some of his scattered wits, and as he saw nothing to tell of pursuit, the Night Hawk began to plan for the future.

His wound was giving him acute pain, and the loss of blood was beginning to tell on his bodily powers, remarkable though those were. And when a little time more brought no signs of his enemies the thug crept cautiously down the gully until he could reach the sullen waters rolling past its mouth. He wet his 'kerchief thoroughly, washing his torn cheek, fingering it gingerly enough until satisfied that the lead had done no worse than tear the flesh over his prominent cheek-bone, then clip a bit from his ear.

"Marked like a hog, cuss him!" he grated, viciously, then hastily covered the wound with a plaster of the stiff blue clay, binding his handkerchief snugly over it, much after the fashion of a man with the toothache.

This done, and making sure no enemy was lurking near the gully in wait for his reappearance, Pony Keefe struck out across the level part of St. Joseph, locally known as "Pateetown," avoiding the more brightly lighted streets, which was easier to do then than at the present day, for Edison's "midnight sun" was yet a boon to be craved.

Crossing the net-work of rails and passing over "Liniment Creek" by one of the least used foot-spans, Pony Keefe soon drew near to the outskirts of the town in that particular direc-

tion. Directly in front of him loomed up the curious bluffs of brick clay, marked by natural steps much after the fashion of the artificial pyramids, and presenting in general outline much the same appearance from a distance.

Pony Keefe evidently had some particular destination in view, but he had received too thorough a fright to forget his precautions even after so long a time without signs of chase. He was cautiously reconnoitering the ground before advancing, when he suddenly came upon a man who uttered a low whistle, just in time to save himself from a shot.

"That you, Pony?"

"Little thanks to you, Mace Wilson!" with a vicious snarl, fingering his weapon as though powerfully tempted to risk at least one shot. "I'm only wonderin' you've quit runnin' this soon!"

"I was knocked at least half-way, and haven't had time since to spell the right road back again," grimly laughed the taller ruffian. "You had it all your own way, of course, pardner?"

Pony Keefe only growled in response, brushing past his mate and pausing to softly rap at a little door to one side of the dimly-lighted saloon, whose front bore the appropriate title of "Hole in the Ground." The building itself was half-hidden at the sides and rear by the steep clay bluff, into which an excavation had been made to secure a level foundation of sufficient size.

After an exchange of signals, so cautious as to be audible only to the ears of the doorkeeper and the applicant, the barrier was opened and both Keefe and Wilson promptly slipped inside. All was utter darkness as the door swung to behind them, but this gave them neither trouble nor uneasiness. They pressed silently forward and upward, pausing at another door, to repeat their signs and signals. Then they stepped into a cool, close-smelling chamber, carved out of the clay bank itself, somewhat above the level of the saloon which served to cover the entrance, and perfectly hidden from any but the most thorough search.

There were half a dozen persons present when the two thugs entered, one of whom, tall, athletic, stern-faced, they silently saluted.

At his shoulder stood Dr. Dairmid, his smooth-shorn face flushed as by drink, his dark eyes glowing like balls of fire in the dim light as he watched the new-comers.

"You've been in a row, Pony?" coldly uttered the tall man, noting the blood-stained cloth which enveloped the head of the lesser rascal.

"All in the way o' business, boss," was the quick response.

"What about that business?"

"I done the best I knowed, boss, but it was a fizzle, clean through."

Dr. Craig Dairmid ground a savage oath between his teeth, but when he would have started forward, the chief checked him with an arm of iron, muttering a few words which only they two could catch.

"A failure, was it? For your own sakes, my fine lads, I trust it became such through no fault or blundering of your own!"

"That's fer you to say, boss," sulkily responded Pony Keefe, gingerly touching his bandaged face. "We done all we knowed; leastways I did," with a half-angry glance toward his comrade of that night's work. "He kin talk fer himself, I reckon!"

"After you is manners, Pony," grimly laughed Wilson.

"Tell what you know, Keefe," harshly commanded the chief, sinking back into the rude chair from which he had risen at the signals. "Cut it as short as you can, without omitting any essentials."

The wounded rascal obeyed, evidently standing in no little awe of this tall fellow. He told a straight story of how he and Mace Wilson had kept on the track of Berry Barfort through all that evening, up to the time of his leaving the gambling-room, a heavy winner.

"We marked his course, then cut around to a dark alley, layin' fer the high-roller. We reckoned we hed him dead to rights, an' so we did, fu'st off. I hit him fu'st, but I reckon his plug hat an' a drunken slip o' his foot fooled me a bit. But he went down, an' I was jest lendin' him one when—they was a reg'lar cyclone hit us, boss!"

"And hit me under the jaw so hard that I turned end for end!" commented Mace Wilson. "And when I stopped playing cart-wheel, it sounded as though every cop in town was soundin' his call!"

"An' me—boss, it cuts me mighty deep to say it, but I was picked up by that same cyclone an' tossed like a chunk clean over its head an' past the middle o' the street!"

"Don't try to stretch it too far, gentlemen," frowned the chief.

"It's straight as a string, boss. I kin lie, but I ain't tryin' any of it on you!" He handled me like I didn't cost a durn cent, but I was goin' at him, fer all, when I see anyway one big cop runnin' that way. I lit out, o' course, but I stopped nigh 'nough to watch 'em a bit, an' when I see 'em walkin' the high-roller down to the Sniffic House, I jest shadowed 'em, fer I wanted to git even—bad!"

"Did you get that hurt when you took your tumble?"

"From the same critter, but not jest then, boss. I see 'em go in the hotel; not the cop; he went back to his beat, I reckon. I brushed me up a bit, an' sneaked inside. It wasn't sech a mighty risk, fer I used to pick my teeth thar, one time, an' I hed cheek 'nough to pull me through ef I run up ag'inst any o' the insiders, I reckoned."

Just at this point there came another signal from without, and all was silent until the proper responses were made to the challenges from within. Then the door swung open and a slender, foppish young fellow entered the secret chamber. Even while saluting the chief, his big blue eyes alighted on the bandaged face of Pony Keefe, and he cried:

"Well, I declare! I was just about to make report that you'd snapped your bull neck short off, dropping out of Doc's window up at the Pacific, Pony!"

Dr. Dairmid started forward with an angry oath.

"My room? What were you doing in there, you scoundrel?"

He was caught by the chief and jerked sharply back with a power which he could not resist. And that stern grip held him motionless while Pony Keefe hurriedly recounted his adventures in the hotel.

"Room or no room, I hedn't time to stop fer that, Doc," he added. "It was the shortest way out, an' the only way, I reckon. You know why I picked the lock in the fu'st place. I could ketch a word now an' then, from in thar, but it didn't tell me plain enough. It was risky at the door, but I could hear better. An' when I done heard—wal, I couldn't jest b'lieve it 'thout havin' a peek at the face o' that devil on ten wheels! An' s— I see him, an' he see me, an' he shot me, an'—boss," with sudden desperation, curiously mixed with abject fear as he more directly addressed his mas er. "Boss, let me off fer a bit, won't you? Gi' me a furlough that'll take me clean out o' the kentry. Ef you don't do it, oath or no oath, I'll hev to jump the job or git pulled by that devil in kids!"

"What do you mean by that?" frowned the chief.

"That I'm all broke up, an' I can't help it, boss. Look at my mark!" and he tore the bandage from his face. Afore day comes, all the cops in town'll be huntin' fer me. An' that he'll be at the head of 'em, too! Let me go, boss! I ain't no good no more. I can't sarve you any longer, an' ef I'm held here I'll git pinched, too mighty tight!"

"Who is this man you're so terribly afraid of?"

"The same who broke up Brocky Sam an' Kit Melady's gang down at Kaw City, boss," lowering his tones with a shiver of fear as he cast a glance over his shoulder, seemingly in dread of beholding that feared personage. "You know him: Dan Dunn, the Soft-Hand Sport!"

An oath, fierce and grating, escaped the Night Hawk chief.

CHAPTER XII.

DR. DAIRMID PRESCRIBES FOR DAN DUNN.

"It's gospel truth, chief," interposed Kid Price, the foppish little fellow who had expressed surprise at the soundness of Pony Keefe's neck. "That was what brought me down here at this hour. I spotted the gent, and thought it best you should know of his presence in town, particularly as he went off in a hack with Berry Barfort. To lay complaint before the city marshal, he gave out, but that was only a blind. I shadowed them past the office and round about to the place where Barfort hangs out when at home."

"An' though you know I'm true blue, boss, ef that devil nips me, I feel like he'd turn me clean outside 'thout half tryin'!"

Dr. Dairmid, once more his usual cold, unmoved self, now spoke up:

"Better send him down to the Lake Nest, chief, until he gets over his scare. He can do the work there just as well as Anson. But now—I'll see you later!"

"Where to in such haste, Doc?"

"To find Mr. Daniel Dunn, and apologize to him for the liberty taken by the insolent varlet who used my room as a cover," coldly smiled the doctor, with a peculiar glitter in his dark eyes.

For a brief space he and the chief looked at each other, then the latter nodded assent to what he saw in those coldly-blazing orbs. Any and every man then present might be fully trusted, but there are some things which had best be kept under cover. And the meaning which the Night Hawk chief saw there was among that list.

Dr. Dairmid quickly found his way to the open air, walking briskly up-town. It was a long stretch to the Pacific House, but he did not care to take a hack, if one might be found at that late hour so far down-town, and the horse-cars were still more objectionable. He wanted both quiet and solitude for thought.

Enough has been shadowed forth to show that Dr. Craig Dairmid was one of a certain number playing a bold and dangerous game for

high stakes. Unless space has been wasted, it has been shown that the doctor was something above the average run of scheming rascals, bold, original, and if not absolutely heartless, at least without scruples as to what means he employed in order to secure his coveted ends.

But despite all this, there was something not far akin to fear in his brain as he reflected over what the lesser Night Hawks had reported shortly before.

He had heard of the cool sport who brought a dangerous gang of evil-doers to grief in Kansas City, only the year before, and the fact was all the more clearly impressed upon his mind because one of the schemers worst punished had been an intimate friend of his; a dashing young speculator and real-estate broker, Nicol Faulkner by name.

"And he's in with Berry Barfort, now?" scowled the doctor, his hands clinching with ugly significance as he strode rapidly along the dark, deserted streets of Pateetown. "What does he know? How much does he suspect? Or is it only an accursed chance? That's what I want to know. That's what I will know, unless—"

He did not complete the reason even in his own mind. Another idea was taking its place, and his face became harder, more pitiless as the details gradually found shape and ranged themselves in order.

"Why not? I'd be a fool to run any unnecessary risks, with such a big stake in the balance!"

There was nothing of all this to be read in the face of Dr. Craig Dairmid as he languidly entered the office of the Pacific House, to find Price Wilkie still out of bed and who immediately greeted him with an excited manner very different from his usual dignified repose.

He hurriedly detailed the exciting episode of the night, adding:

"It was an ugly chance that led the rascal through your room, doctor, but I've had a new lock put on and the carpet shall be changed in the morning. Until then you won't mind taking another room?"

"You say the fellow only passed through?" asked the doctor, as he moved toward his chamber accompanied by the landlord. "He hadn't time to meddle with any of my traps, I trust?"

"I think not—I'm almost sure not," was the hasty response. "I'll stand good for any loss, of course, and by night we'll have everything put in apple-pie order, so—"

"Don't hurry yourself on my account," coolly interjected Dairmid. "I expect to be absent for a few days. Not out of town, but watching by the side of a very sick patient. Doubtless all will be arranged by the time I can come back."

Wilkie had no difficulty in divining who that patient was, but he contented himself with asking how the retired merchant was progressing. Dr. Dairmid briefly replied, without imparting any particular information, however.

Wilkie pointed out the bloody tracks and profusely apologized for not having everything set in order at once, but he could not be sure when the doctor would drop in and—

"It don't matter in the least, dear sir," blandly smiled Dairmid, after a hasty examination of his belongings, to pronounce them all right. "I will leave early. I want to catch an hour or two of sleep while I can, and this room suits me better than a strange one. I'm a bit peculiar that way, old as I am. And so—By the way, my next door neighbor: have you run him out of his room, too?"

Price Wilkie shook his head, a frown wrinkling his brows.

"I'm not so sure but I ought to, though!" after telling how Dan Dunn had driven off to lay a complaint before the police. "The impudence of the fellow! Turning my house into a shooting gallery!"

Having learned all he wanted just then, Dr. Dairmid managed to dismiss the landlord, locking his door behind him, begging that the corridor might be kept as silent as possible until he had time to fall asleep, at least, for he sorely required rest.

He yawned heavily as he spoke the parting words, but never a man was more entirely awake than he the instant he was left alone.

He turned his gas low, and pulled down the blind at his one window. He paused before a door in the side of his room, which looked as if it might lead into a closet, but which was really a possible mode of communicating with the chamber adjoining his; the same in which we have seen Dan Dunn and Berry Barfort a little earlier that same night.

Dr. Dairmid bent his eye to the keyhole, but all was dark beyond. Despite the assurance of Price Wilkie that the chamber was unoccupied at present, the doctor pressed an ear lightly over the little hole, holding his breath while listening with all his powers. Not a sound.

"Give me an hour, or even half that long, Daniel, and mayhap I'll set a little trap that will take you out of my path—if indeed you are in it!"

He took a small case of instruments out of his breast-pocket, opening it and selecting a pe-

culiar instrument for a doctor to carry. With this tool he quickly shot back the bolt of the lock, then turned the knob and cautiously pushed the door open a bit. No sound from beyond. Little by little he opened the door, until he could slip inside the other chamber.

A single glance assured him that he was the sole occupant, and he moved with more celerity thereafter. Though the light coming from his chamber was dim enough, still his sight was keen, and he quickly noted each and every object in the room, his eyes resting longest on an embroidered cigar-case lying on the white coverlet of the unrumpled bed.

A slight ejaculation escaped his lips at this, and picking it up he opened it, to find the case half full of cigars. He next examined the curious monogram worked on one side, reading them slightly incorrectly, thanks to his belief that its owner was really named Dunn.

"Daniel T. Dunn, eh?" he muttered, a cold smile creeping to his lips as he moved back to his own chamber, drawing the door to behind him but not latching it. "A smoker, or he wouldn't carry this. Well, why not *that* way? It's a vile and filthy habit, Daniel! You'd ought to be punished for turning your mouth into a furnace and your nostrils into smoke-stacks. Ought—and—shall!"

There was an ugly significance in those slowly-breathed words that was admirably suited to the reddish glitter in his dark eyes. No honest man could have heard the one or seen the other without a shiver of dislike and suspicion. Taken together, they branded the physician as a murderer!

Having come upon the vehicle he sought, Dr. Dairmid cut little time to waste, for he knew not at what moment the rightful owner of those cigars might return to the hotel, and his game was too heavy to risk waiting for another and possibly surer chance.

With deft fingers he selected several little bottles from his pocket medicine-case, carefully mixing them in certain proportions, until he had possibly half an ounce of colorless liquid in readiness.

With a delicate hypodermic syringe he proceeded to fully impregnate each of the three cigars which he had discovered in the case, taking particular care not to break the wrapper or leave any marks sufficient to awaken suspicion, then replacing them in the same side of the case from which he had taken them, closing the metal clasp.

"I trust you are too stingy to offer a cigar to a friend, Daniel," the heartless villain laughed softly to himself as he passed through the door and carefully placed the case just where he had found it. "Because I'm only shooting at *you*. Still, if the gun does scatter a bit what matter? They say this country is getting over-populated, and I don't know a quicker or less painful death to die!"

His work accomplished as far as lay in his power, Dr. Dairmid returned to his own chamber, deftly relocking the door, confident that he had completely covered his tracks.

"Sag, of course, but if a man will drop dead of heart disease while smoking a cigar, who's to blame?" he laughed as he turned off his gas, leaving the room in perfect darkness.

And none too soon, as a few moments more proved. The sound of a rapid, springy foot came echoing faintly from the stairs, and as the doctor listened intently, his eyes shone redly through the gloom. For the steps paused opposite the next chamber. He heard a key turn in the lock and then withdraw as the door opened. He heard it close, heard the key turn once more, and then he saw a tiny ray of light stream through the keyhole of the door in the side wall.

He silently drew off his shoes, creeping on tiptoe to the door, abruptly pausing as he heard the knob faintly rattle as though the occupant of the other room was making sure the bolt was sprung.

An instant later the little ray of light was cut off, and he knew an eye was stooping to the keyhole. His blood seemed to stop flowing for an instant with sudden fear. Had he made any mistake? Had he left any signs behind him by which the—

His breath came again and his blood shot tingling through his veins as a soft, mellow whistle came from the other chamber. The keyhole was once more unobscured, and he heard the man moving a chair or the little table.

Still his breath lest it betray him, Dr. Dairmid bent an eye to the keyhole, knowing that in the darkness which filled his own room he ran no risk of betraying himself as the other had done. And an ugly light came into his eyes as he saw Dan Dunn standing by the side of the bed, an unlighted cigar between his lips, and just slipping the embroidered case into his breast pocket where he habitually carried it.

"Will he smoke it now?" flashed through his busy brain at this sight. "Is he going out again, at this hour? Will he smoke it in his room? *Do it, you scoundrelly bloodhound!*" he grated viciously.

To draw back hastily but silently, fearing he had unwittingly betrayed his presence, for Dan

Dunn turned squarely toward the closed door. No sound followed as the scheming villain waited in breathless suspense. Perfect silence for a score of seconds. Then he heard the bed faintly creak and shortly afterward the sound of a dropping shoe or boot on the carpeted floor.

Emboldened by this, he again stooped with eye to the keyhole, to see Dan Dunn lighting a cigar at the gas-jet before turning it out.

"Good enough, gentle Daniel!" the murderer softly breathed in unholy glee. "Another mysterious death for the newspapers!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL.

THERE was wholly unfeigned surprise in the face of Dan Dunn at Berry Barfort's words, but there was a touch of genius in his manner of retaining possession of the photograph in question, despite the hasty effort which his host made to recover it.

Seemingly unaware of that wish, the detective caught up the card and rose to hold it closer to the gas-jet, his whole manner that of one who wishes to explain how such an awkward mistake became possible. Only that could be read in his handsome face, but what conflicting passions lay beneath the surface!

"I forgot—I never knew the card was in there," added Barfort, passing around the table in order to gain the side of his friend, his hand quickly closing over the pictured face and hiding it from view. "Not that I don't—but it's hardly the thing, you know, Dunn."

"I beg your pardon, dear boy, a thousand times over," said the detective, forcing a little embarrassed laugh as he resigned the photograph, and actually blushing a bit under those dark eyes. "Not only for taking a second look—I couldn't help *that*, you know, for how else could a fellow find an excuse for making such an extraordinary mistake? But—help me out, Berry, can't you?"

Dan Dunn dropped back into the chair he had vacated, the picture of half-amused anger and perplexity, and so perfectly did he carry out his suddenly-conceived rôle that Barfort never once doubted his complete sincerity.

He slipped the card into a breast pocket, leaving the album still open on the table.

"We'll let it drop at that, Dunn. It was a strange bit of carelessness on my part, and when I saw the card, and heard you speaking of it in such terms, why—"

"That's what cuts me deepest, pardner," interposed the Soft-Hand Sport, his face flushing anew, his lips curling as though in self-contempt. "I'm all off to-night! I don't often make such a bad break, but the fact is I only caught a glimpse of the face, and, like an idiot, I mistook it for that of a rather noted burlesque actress; maybe you've heard of her? Harlequin Hat or Hattie, I think it was?"

Barfort flushed up, but it was with offended pride, as the keenly watchful detective had no difficulty in deciding.

"I never had the honor of meeting the—*the lady you mention*," he somewhat stiltily responded.

"I'm not saying you're greatly the loser for that, dear boy," the sport laughed, lightly. "Not that I believe all rumor has to say, as a rule, but I reckon Hattie *was* a rather bad lot, all in all. Handsome—or I could never have made such a monstrous mistake, even through a side-glimpse."

"Never mind. I'm not blaming you, only—let's drop the subject, please. Tell me what you think about that other; the picture of Knox Coventry, I mean."

There was no immediate response. Dan Dunn slipped a hand into his breast-pocket, where he habitually carried his cigar case, giving a little exclamation as he failed to find it, but his face almost immediately clearing up again.

"I remember, now! I left it on the bed in my room. I say, pardner, you don't happen to have a spare weed about your clothes?"

Berry Barfort produced a box of cigars, and what with selecting and lighting one of these, Dan Dunn secured time enough in which to collect his thoughts and to decide on his course. When this was done, he wasted little time but came bluntly to the point:

"What do I think of that picture, eh? That if good, he's very, very good, and if bad, he's just horrid!"

"There can be no 'if' about it," frowned the other. "Knox Coventry is a gentleman clean through and back again! I'd stake my life on his perfect rectitude without the slightest fear of losing."

"Then 'good' is the term of course, pardner. I never meant to hint otherwise, but my wits seem off on a vacation to-night and my ton ue wags backward. Yet—you must remember that all I know of the family is what I've gathered through casual gossip on the street and in odd nooks where people were discussing the news. I heard something about a fortune, or a will, or—is that tabcoed, also?" he innocently asked, as he caught another frown contracting the brows of his friend.

Berry Barfort hesitated a little before replying. He was naturally reserved, proud and sensitive. His main faults were a hot temper and

a leaning toward jealousy. As a rule he kept his fears and hopes to himself, but just now he sorely felt the need of a friend in whom he could confide his troubles: heavy and sore they were, too.

Dan Dunn saw as much, and promptly took advantage of the chance.

"Barfort, my best and closest friend calls you his friend. You're in trouble, and I'd ask nothing better than to help you tide it over. I don't say I can do this, for as yet I've only a ghostly glimmer of the actual facts; but I do say this much, and I say it strong!

"If you can bring yourself to trust me wholly, fully, without the slightest reserve, I'll do my level best to see you through. Of course, whatever you may tell me lies strictly between us two. But—I'd rather drop the matter right now and here than to receive only a partial explanation."

There was a deep earnestness in his manner, even more than in the words he uttered, that strongly impressed the young man. If he hesitated, it was only for a single breath. Then he grasped Dan Dunn's hand and pressed it cordially as he broke out:

"I'll do it, and try to thank you when I'm more myse."

"Then we'll go into the case as though it was simple business," nodded the detective. "Miss Rena Coventry is an heiress in her own right, I believe. Tell me just what that means, as a starter."

Barfort flushed a bit, as though taken aback by this blunt beginning, but the bargain was of his own making, and he did not refuse.

"You heard aright, Dunn. Miss Coventry is an heiress, apart from what she will naturally inherit from her father, as his only surviving child. This fortune—I never asked its exact amount, but I know it is considerably more than a million—was left by a great uncle, who died a misanthrope, as he might be called.

"I never took the trouble to investigate closely, but I believe he was a stern, rigid, austere old fellow, whose two daughters both eloped from home with men whom he would not favor. He disinherited them, and refused to see or have any communication with them whatever, up to the hour of their death. They both died, leaving no children. He was a widower. Knox Coventry was his nearest blood relative, though I'm not sure if they ever met in the flesh.

"The old fellow died, and his will showed something of what he had suffered in life. His entire fortune was left to the daughter of Knox Coventry, on certain conditions. She was to wait for it until her twenty-first birthday. If she married before that date, she was to lose everything. If she ran away from home to marry, the same. If single at the age of twenty-one, and her father was dead, she could at once come into possession. If he still lived, she was to wait until she wedded, with her father's full and free consent, and if she never married, the fortune was to revert to certain named charities at her death."

"Rather complicated, don't you think?" laughed Dunn.

"I'm no lawyer, you know," smiling faintly. "But I think I've given the gist of the will. You see, his own children ran away from him when they were still very young, and I suppose he wanted to guard against this in Miss Coventry, as far as love of money could do so."

"And her father could in no case finger the legacy?"

Berry Barfort shook his head in negation.

"Save by giving his daughter to a man who would permit him to take a goodly slice, supposing he wanted it," added the Soft-Hand Sport.

Barfort flushed up again at this slow speech, and his tones were verging close on anger as he cried:

"I won't hear to any hints of that temper, Dunn! For the last time I tell you Knox Coventry is the very soul of honor! Why, man, I'd just as soon think my father—rest his soul!—could have been guilty of a mean or dishonest act as I would Knox Coventry!"

"You may be right, pardner," was the cool retort, "but there is a mighty big change come over the whole place, and you can't deny it. If Knox Coventry is all you claim, why does he consort with such a dirty scoundrel as you paint Craig Dairmid? Why does he permit him to rule in his house, as rule he surely must, to shut you out; and you the accepted lover of his only daughter?"

"He is too ill—"

"Take it that way, if you like it better," with a lighter tone of voice. "Still, there is a change, and no change comes without a cause behind it. And if Doctor Dairmid is putting on frills without a commission, the sooner we find it out the shorter will be his reign. But, mind you, dear boy," growing earnest again: "don't get into a row with the fellow if you can possibly avoid it. Wait until we can get all the facts together."

"First, you want to lie down and catch a little sleep to steady your nerves and clear your brain. Then eat a solid meal. When you've got that far along, call at Coventry Place. Ask

for Miss Coventry, and insist on having an interview. Don't boil over if you are refused admittance, as you were before. Keep cool, whatever else you do. Say that you must see the lady. Stick to it all day if you can't get there any sooner, and if the bell gives out, and your knuckles can't stand the pressure, use a dornick. Keep asking, and get there! When you do—use your eyes as well as your tongue, my lad! Don't leave without a full and perfect understanding, if it takes a week! But—keep a stiff curb on your temper, especially if Dr. Dairmid shows up."

"I'll break his infernal neck!"

"Then I'll bear witness against you at the inquest, and help hang you for an idiot!" bluntly retorted Dan Dunn, rising to his feet, a smile on his lips but a stern light in his eyes. "I mean it, Barfort, in spirit if not in letter. There's a deep game going on, and Dairmid has both hands in it up to the elbows. If you want to keep him from winning, you've got to play cool and play keen. If you let your temper slop over—good-by—may I see Rena?"

Barfort caught his extended hand, gazing anxiously into his eyes.

"You know more than you see fit to tell me, Dunn! Is this keeping the compact you forced me into, a bit ago?"

"Did I promise to lay bare all my secrets?" with a soft laugh, as he returned that pressure. "If I did, I'll keep my word. But there isn't time for more talk just now. You want to catch a little nap before bearding the—I sincerely trust it will prove lion, not lioness."

"Do you want to insult me, Mr. Dunn?" flashed Barfort, hotly.

"Not a bit of it, dear fellow," with a soft laugh. "Simply to test your temper. It's too peppery, pardner. Try to sleep some of it off, or I fear we'll both regret the advice I gave you a bit ago. It might be some satisfaction to your latted, thumping the doctor, but I'm dubious about the ultimate benefit. Understand, lad?"

If that had really been a slip of the tongue, Dunn covered it fairly well, and Barfort accepted his explanation as genuine. Perhaps it was just as well that his wits were rather muddled, after all!

Though Dan Dunn protested against his taking the trouble when his few leisure minutes might be so much better employed, Berry Barfort insisted in bearing his newly company to the outer door at least. As his room was in the second story, this did not take long, but Barfort stepped outside, drawing the door to behind him, the more surely to guard against their last words being overheard by any curious ears within.

Directly in front of them stood a private lamp, still burning, despite the full moon now sailing through a clear sky overhead, and its beams threw their figures into plain relief for the moment.

Dan Dunn, for the moment, was completely off his guard, and failed to note the dark figure skulking across the street until it sprang into swift motion. Then he struck Barfort sharply, knocking him off the end of the step, himself leaping back as a glittering circle swept past the lamp, to strike the door with a peculiar thump!

CHAPTER XIV.

A WASTED PRESCRIPTION.

THERE was no time to count force or measure distances, and both Dan Dunn and Berry Barfort fell as they left the narrow steps, one of his own volition, the other from a sharp blow on his chest. And the detective, in addition, only regained his feet after turning a back somerset over the low fence which divided one section of the brick row from its next neighbor.

Berry Barfort had fallen partially into a little half-circle of bricks, guarding a basement window, but he was on his feet the first, uttering an indignant oath as he glared about for his false friend, as he now deemed the detective. And only for the fence between him, it is more than probable that Dan Dunn would have felt the weight of that hard-clinched fist before he could have given an explanation of his conduct.

"You tricky scoundrel!" panted the young man, but Dunn was looking down the dimly-lighted street where a nimble figure was just fading out of sight.

"Go it, Kid!" he uttered, thinly-veiled vengeance in his tones, low and even though they were. "I can't match your heels, with the start you've got, but I'll—Hello, pardner!" with a short laugh as Barfort leaned over the fence and tried to grasp him. "Beg pardon for tumbling you over, but I didn't have time to ask your leave!"

"What in blazes—"

"It did resemble a little wheel of lightning, didn't it?" still with a peculiar laugh as he brushed aside that angry arm and lightly leaped over the fence to step up to the door and jerk a keen-pointed knife from where it was still quivering in the woodwork. "Was it meant for you, or am I to consider it a compliment?"

Barfort turned pale, his eyes widely distended,

Not with pure fear, for he was bold enough under ordinary circumstances, but his nerves were in poor condition for withstanding these repeated shocks.

"You don't mean—"

"That some gay and festive critter thought to give us a bit of a scare, pardner," cut in Dan Dunn, slipping the knife into his outer pocket. "I hardly reckon it was anything worse than that, and such being the case, it's hardly worth while to waste more time over it. If anybody asks you how that hole came in the door, tell 'em you don't know. Good-night, pardner. Go in and go to bed. Sleep hearty, and wake up cool enough for business. Make your call. Follow the line I marked out and let me know the results when I get around this way again."

Without giving Barfort time to utter a word in reply, Dan Dunn passed through the little gate and strode rapidly down the street, his keen eyes glancing into the dark alley at the mouth of which he had last seen the fleeting knife-thrower, but without making any discovery.

"Maybe I'll run up against you again, Kid Price!" he muttered with a fleeting smile as he passed on. "If I do, shall I give you back your dainty toothpick? And—point foremost?"

It was no great distance down to the Pacific Hotel, but while covering it the Soft-Hand Sport crowded a great deal of thinking into the minutes consumed. Not of Kid Price and his knife-throwing; that was dismissed if not forgotten immediately after passing the mouth of the alley into which the would-be assassin had dived in hasty flight. But of those two photographs and the memories which they awakened.

But nothing of all this showed in his handsome face as he entered the hotel and called for the key to his room. Only the night-clerk was in the room, and though he seemed inclined to talk over the shooting affair of a few hours before, even bending so far as to press a choice cigar upon the sport, Dan Dunn wasted little time in passing on to his chamber.

He had a matter of far more importance than the escapade of Pony Keefe to think over, and he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Yet a life of danger and many treacherous snares had taught him a caution which was rarely forgotten, even while seeming the most reckless, and eager though he was to get at the truth of the real or suspected discoveries he had so unexpectedly made that night, Dan Dunn put them aside until he was fully at liberty to take them up in due order.

He struck a match and turned on the gas, then glanced at once toward the door which offered a possible mode of communication with the next room: the same which, as he had that night learned for the first time, was rented by Dr. Craig Dairmid.

His lips closed tightly, as though to smother an ejaculation, and a steely glow leaped into his blue-gray eyes as he saw that the door had plainly been tampered with during his absence, though, of course, he could not be positive it was the work of a personal enemy. It might possibly be that one or both of the landlords had opened or caused the door to be opened; but that it had been opened since his departure in company with Berry Barfort, he had indisputable evidence.

Knowing that he was bound on a perilous mission, which would be doubly dangerous should his true character be discovered, Dan Dunn had taken a very simple precaution to know if any attempt was made to enter his room by unlawful means.

Across the crack between door and casing, he had drawn frail white threads in three different places, sticking both ends fast with paste. One and all of these were broken, though too fine and too short to attract the notice of any one save the one who had placed them there.

To make sure that they had been broken by the door opening, and not simply loosened at the ends, Dan Dunn approached the door, his hand accidentally touching the knob and making it rattle. He quickly covered this, in case the next room should be occupied by an enemy, by openly shaking the knob, then stooping to peer through the keyhole.

He could see nothing, but he had not expected to see aught. It was simply to convey the idea, if any one was in lying in wait, that he was making sure of his own privacy. And then he moved away, softly whistling a bit from an opera, apparently wholly at ease.

Though his suspicions were fully awakened, he picked up his cigar-case and pocketed it without a thought of danger from that source. He was looking for some cunning trap, but without seeing aught to arouse his suspicions afresh. Apparently, his few belongings were precisely as he had left them.

"Who came in that way, then?" he mused, sitting for a moment on the edge of the bed, unbuttoning and kicking off his shoes. "Is any one in there now, waiting for me to fall asleep? No one unless it may be the gentle doctor! Well, we'll see what comes of it, anyway!"

He silently passed to his own door, unlocking it and leaving it ajar a trifle, without making a sound to betray himself. Then he went to the

gas-jet, lit his cigar, turned off the light and flung himself on the bed to think and to wait.

That was his greatest weakness; the love of tobacco. He could do more and clearer reasoning by its aid. And he felt the need of every help, just now.

So much had happened! He had made so many startling discoveries that night! Or—were they discoveries? Were they anything more than empty fancies, born of a tired brain? Would they fade away into naught as soon as he had "caught up" with his lost sleep?

He had been powerfully struck by the picture which Berry Barfort pronounced that of Knox Coventry, and felt that he would give a small fortune could he see a counterfeit of the same face, minus that long silvery beard which so completely veiled the more decided features. But the sight of that other photograph: young, rarely beautiful, smiling, full of grace and seeming innocence: had fairly electrified him!

"I'd make oath in open court it was taken from life—and that life belonging solely and surely to Harlequin Hat! If—if the artist had only selected the *right* side of her face. It was taken thus on at least one occasion, and I'd dearly like to have a memento—why not?" and he gave a start at the thought. "If I'd only have thought of sending a line to the chief! I'll do it first thing in the morning!"

Just then he heard a slight sound from the adjoining chamber. If all had not been so profoundly quiet throughout the hotel, he would never have observed it, though his ears were on the keen alert all the while. As it was, he could not be sure it was occasioned by anything more than a mouse, or some such harmless cause; but there was far too much at stake to run any chances, and he silently slipped from bed to the floor, touching Kid Price's knife with a hand as he stole to his chamber door, crouching down where he could peer through the narrow crack prepared beforehand.

A few seconds later he had his reward. He heard the next door carefully open, and then close. He caught sight of a dimly-outlined figure in the corridor, and never moved until it crept silently away in the direction of the stairs, to pause again when at a little distance.

Carefully widening his loophole, Dan Dunn saw a man stooping to slip on his shoes. Then, thanks to the light turned low at the head of the stairs, he distinctly recognized the face and figure of Dr. Dairmid!

As the schemer vanished from sight, the detective closed his door and locked it, returning to his bed, to weigh the curious circumstance.

"He was in there when I came. He must have heard, if not seen me. He steals away in his socks, as though he was afraid of being heard. By whom? By me? It looks mightily like it!"

"That door was opened, almost certainly from his room. Again, why? Was I right in connecting him with the gang to which Pony belongs? Pony must have heard Barfort call me by name. Pony got away, with my mark. Did Pony meet the doctor? Did the doctor think I might cause him trouble? If so—that would account for his trying to get me down first! But how? I have nothing here that he could—"

Dan Dunn started to his feet as though something had suddenly released a powerful spring. He struck a match and ignited the gas. He took the case from his pocket and opened it to inspect the contents.

"If he wanted to poison me, who knows—is that so?"

Careful as Dr. Dairmid had been in "putting up" his "prescription," he had not counted on having it inspected so soon, though when he stole from his chamber he firmly believed the detective was either dead or dying from the effects of one of those very cigars! We have seen how he fell into this mistake, through the curiosity of the night clerk.

As Dan Dunn took out a cigar to inspect it, he noticed that it was damp, while he always preferred a thoroughly seasoned weed. And guided by what he had seen, by what he suspected, he came very near the truth, although, under other circumstances, he would never have noticed the change in his cigars, or would have attributed it to the heat of his own body.

"It may still be that, but I'll take no chances, doctor!" he grimly muttered, as he carefully wrapped up case and all, securing it with a string. "I'll make sure by having a chemist test them before night."

He turned off the gas, pushing up the shade in front of his window. Day was just dawning, and as his room fronted the south, a little of the gray dawn crept in through the glass; enough to relieve the darkness.

Dan Dunn returned to his bed, but without the least notion of going to sleep, though he knew that he must shortly secure some repose if he was to keep his wits clear and his brain in working order. On the night before he had also kept vigil, puzzling over the different clues and trails of the Night Hawks.

He did not lack food for thought, though he found it no easy task to concentrate his mind on any one point, where so many of deep interest offered themselves for elucidation; but on one point he became more and more decided.

"I've got to leave this ranch! I've got to go bury Dan Dunn and blossom forth into a new and entirely different character!" he muttered, as he rose, put on his shoes and left the room, but without taking any of his few belongings with him. "My board is paid ahead, and they can store them until I come back to life again."

He passed through the office without speaking to any one, and at once left the building by the front or main exit, to stop short with a cold smile directly in front of a foppishly-dressed young fellow.

"Hello, Kid!" and he slipped the knife from his pocket, thrusting it into his hand. "You lost this last night, I believe?"

CHAPTER XV.

TORTURED WHILE TORTURING.

As far as possible, Berry Barfort acted upon the parting advice of his friend in need, though he found it altogether out of the question to do more than fall into a troubled and unrefreshing doze. He tried conscientiously, but it was of no avail. His brain was too thoroughly excited and his nerves too tensely strung.

He left the house quite early, without stopping for breakfast, and both as an aid to passing away the hours which must of necessity elapse before he could call at Coventry Place, and in hopes of cooling his brain and building up his body, he visited a bath-house.

This gave him something of an appetite, and a restaurant did the rest. So that, about mid-forenoon, one who had met that pale, unsteady, haggard-eyed fellow leaving his boarding-place, would hardly have recognized the quick-stepping athlete who left the pave and crossed the trimly-kept lawn to the front door of the fine residence occupied by the Coventrys, father and daughter.

There were no outward signs of life about the place, though Berry Barfort hardly paused to note as much. Now that his fate was so near at hand, he had thoughts for nothing else.

Outwardly he was composed enough, though his dark eyes were more than usually brilliant, and his jaws were squared by his clinched teeth.

Ascending the granite steps and crossing the shaded portico, he touched the bell, awaiting the result with enforced composure. And when the call was answered by the footman, he nodded briefly, as usual, and quietly asked:

"Your mistress, John; of course she is in?"

The servant flushed a trifle, and was hardly as prompt to answer as in brighter hours, but he managed to stammer:

"I think—I'll see, sir."

"Thanks," and Barfort pushed the door further open, passing into the vestibule as though it was all a matter of course. "Tell Miss Coventry that Berry Barfort is waiting, will you, John?"

He passed into the parlor to his right, his heart throbbing so thick and fast that a blur came before his eyes. He had counted so surely on serious opposition to his entrance, after his experience of the past day, that this easy and speedy success came perilously near to breaking down the stern restraint which he had placed upon his emotion.

So strongly was he moved that it seemed to him his loved one must be very near to him, perhaps within that very room, and he brushed a hand across his eyes to clear his vision, the bare thought doing little to restore his shaken nerves.

He was alone in the room; the same apartment in which he had dared to breathe his first word of love to the ears of Rena Coventry. And it was here that he won the sweetest, most precious confession man can ever gain in this life.

This, and a thousand only less tender memories flocked to him in those first few minutes, and fight against the weakness though he might and did, Berry Barfort felt his reserve powers rapidly weakening. It was so easy to resolve to keep cool and under guard. It was so vastly different when the critical moment came.

He took a seat and tried to compose his whirling brain. He sprang to his feet as he recognized the chair: it was the identical one in which Rena Coventry was seated when he came back to tell her that Knox Coventry had consented to make them both happy by granting his prayer!

He could see her now as he saw her then: just a little paler than ordinary, with a half-smile, half-quiver about her red lips; with a shy yet eager light beaming from her glorious blue eyes as they turned upon him to read the verdict.

The sound of an opening door caused him to turn quickly in that direction, and with a quick, gasping breath he started forward, both hands extended, his face irradiated, for the instant forgetting all his doubts and jealous fears: for he saw before him his peerless love.

"Rena—my light, my life!" he passionately uttered.

Only to stop short, his wildly leaping heart stilling as the maiden, cold, pale, almost stern, waved him back with a jeweled hand.

"Not that—never more words of love, Mr. Barfort," she uttered, her voice cold and

steady, each syllable coming clear cut as of ice.

"Rena, what do you mean?"

"That I am sorry you forced your way into my presence, Mr. Barfort. That I hoped and prayed you would wait in patience until I could collect my thoughts enough to tell you what a vast, what a complete change has come over life for both you and I. Even now I pray it may not be too late. If you ever loved me—"

"If I—you dare ask or doubt that, Rena?" with hoarse impetuosity, as he covered the space between them and clasped her tightly to his swelling chest, raining kisses that scorched on face and neck.

There was a faint, brief struggle, as though she would escape him even then. A sobbing cry parted her lips, but too faint and weak to pass through the door which she had closed behind her on entering the room. And then, yielding to his fierce embrace, her eyes closed.

Even in his madness Berry Barfort saw this, and he believed the victory was fairly won. The thought served to quell his fierce jealousy, and though his caresses continued, his almost savage pressure relaxed.

"If I ever loved you, Rena? You could doubt that? I will not believe it! You know I love you, and you only. You know I would gladly give my life to save you from a single pang of—"

With a sudden effort such as he had never deemed possible for a woman of her physique, Rena Coventry tore herself from his embrace, staggering back a pace or two, but straightening up almost to rigidity the next instant, waving him back with a glittering weapon in her hand!

"Back, Mr. Barfort!" her voice clear and resolute once more. "Back, or I'll fall dead at your very feet!"

He stood like one petrified, scarce believing the evidence of his own senses.

Could this be the shy, tender girl whom he had wooed and won? Who had seemed all modesty, all grace, all love while in his presence?

"Not you, but myself!" she added, turning the gleaming dagger until its keen point was hidden in the lace that masked her swelling bosom.

"Rena—Miss Coventry!" he gasped, longing yet fearing to spring forward and wrest that dangerous toy from her white hand.

"Never more Rena—never more ought but the address of a complete stranger, Mr. Barfort," with just the faintest show of a tremor in the name. "Will you not believe me without forcing me to say more? Will you not go—if you ever loved me, go!"

With a desperate effort at self-control Barfort succeeded in uttering, his tones harsh and unnatural:

"In whose favor, Miss Coventry?"

The maiden shrunk back a pace as though recoiling from a heavy blow. Her face turned paler than ever, and Barfort, shocked by his own speech, started forward, believing her about to fall. Instead, she swiftly passed around the center-table, drawing her superb form rigidly erect and coldly crying:

"Touch me not, Berry Barfort, if you are a gentleman!"

A more cruel blow could hardly have been formed. Barfort paused, white as a dead man, feeling benumbed in every limb. A mist came over his eyes, and he failed to note how Rena Coventry steadied herself by dropping a trembling hand to the table. To him she seemed cold and pitilessly hard.

"I should not have said that, perhaps, Mr. Barfort," she added, her speech slow and painfully distinct, so tensely drawn were her nerves. "But, after all, it may be just as well. If I can make you hate me—if I can make you despise me, even!"

"I do not understand!" muttered the bewildered lover.

There was a brief pause, during which Rena Coventry lowered her eyes to the dagger which she had placed on the table between them. She seemed to find it no easy task to select words befitting her duty. Or finding them, to shape her sentences so as to fully express her resolve without being unnecessarily cruel to this man who so truly loved her.

"I feel as though I was living a dream! A horrible, hideous nightmare! Rena—"

"Never that word, Mr. Barfort!" almost harshly interposed the maiden, lifting a hand to command his silence or to keep him from approaching her more closely. "The time for that is gone, never to return. You and I must be as though we had never met. I give you back your vows," and as she spoke the words she drew a silken thread from her corsage and snapped from it a gleaming jewel, pushing it across the table toward the young man. "And with them I restore your ring."

Rena Coventry shrunk back as he sprang forward, but it was needless, just then. He grasped the jewel and dropping it to the floor, savagely ground it to a shapeless mass under his heel.

A faint cry parted her blanched lips as his blazing eyes rose to challenge hers, but he never paused to ask if it was of fear for her false self,

or a pang of pain at this harsh denunciation of that once blissful tie.

"That is the best use I can put it to, Miss Coventry!"

"If you can destroy memory as easily, sir, you are to be envied," with a painful catch in her breath, which she hastily sought to cover before he could note or attempt to take advantage of it. "Be it so. I thank you for so promptly aiding me in this painful duty."

"Painful—Rena, am I mad, or are you simply trying me?"

"Neither, Mr. Barfort," still in that cold, mechanical tone. "I am simply telling you what you ought to have learned before. I made a terrible mistake when I accepted your honest love. I am not, I never was deserving of it. I do not love you. I can never love as the woman should who is fated to become your wife."

"Rena—have you no mercy?" he hoarsely gasped.

"I do not love you," still so coldly, so mercilessly as he deemed her forced composure. "I can never marry you. Then—is it not best and most merciful to plainly tell you this before it is entirely too late? Would you claim as wife one who could not give you everything?"

"You *did* love me! You dare not look into my eyes and repeat those cruelly false words, Rena Coventry!"

"Grant that I once loved you, if you will. But I do not love you now. I have changed—changed in body and brain and soul!" with a sudden but brief outburst of real emotion. "And with that change—Mr. Barfort, will you not show a little pity on your side? Will you not help me through a painful task? At least pretend to believe me when I repeat that all is over between you and me. Try to grant me one prayer: That from this hour, we may never willingly meet each other, in or out of society. Or, if we do meet, let it be as perfect strangers!"

"Do you really mean all this, Rena?" hardly aware that he was repeatedly using that forbidden name. "Are you firmly bent on severing every tie that bound us together? I ask this quite as much for your sake as my own. It is hard—very hard to think or reason, while you are trying me so hideously! Yet you must have some good reason for your strange conduct."

"Have I not told you?" her voice giving a little shiver as of pain or weariness. "Must I repeat it all? Must I say once again that if ever I loved you, that love has died?"

With a swift movement Berry Barfort passed around the table and caught her in his arms before she could evade him. He looked into her eyes with fierce scrutiny, as he hoarsely muttered:

"Now—heart to heart, eye to eye—repeat those words, Rena Coventry! Say again that your love for me is dead—if you can!"

Slowly, painfully, yet without a tremor in her voice, came the words:

"My love is dead—dead and buried beyond all resurrection!"

"Given to another, you mean!" and he released her with a savage laugh, to add. "I'll wring the whole truth from his evil lips!"

"Soare him—have mercy!" gasped the maiden, a hand to her heart as she reeled, then sunk to the floor with a choking cry.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEATEN AT ALL POINTS.

WITH those fierce words, Berry Barfort had turned to rush from the room in a mad desire to find Craig Dairmid and wreak upon him the vengeance which, even in his mad jealousy, he could not inflict upon this fair, false woman.

He did not see Rena reel and fall, but the sound caused him to turn in alarm, just as the door opened and Clara Sandys rushed shrieking into the parlor.

"He's killed her! My poor darling—help! help!"

She dropped to her knees and lifted the fair head to her bosom, sobbing and shrieking at intervals. Berry Barfort, staggered by the sight of that ghastly white face, and still further bewildered by that hysterical charge of murder, shrank back involuntarily.

He had undergone so much during the past two days that his nerves and brain were in poor condition for meeting and coping with such an emergency, and before he could rally himself, Dr. Dairmid sprung into the room and caught the fainting maiden from the frantic grasp of the hysterically-acting maid.

"Are you mad, woman?" he almost savagely grated, lowering the unconscious maiden to the floor. "Don't you know that to lift the head of a fainting person is rank suicide?"

"You devil!" hoarsely cried Berry Barfort, striding forward with a light of murder in his eyes. "Touch that angel!"

Dr. Dairmid deftly brushed his stroke aside as he leaped to his feet, whistling sharply as he did so. And almost immediately a stout policeman entered the room with baton drawn.

"Show him outside the house, officer," coldly uttered the physician, waving a hand toward the bewildered young man that there might be no mistaking his meaning. "If he will go

quietly and decently, you can set him free when fairly clear of the—"

"I'll kill you!" panted Barfort.

"Just mark his threat, will you, officer?" coldly asked the doctor, without the slightest change of tone.

The policeman caught Barfort by the arm as it drew back to level another blow at that hated face, and he whispered, not unkindly:

"Don't make me give you the collar in sober earnest, young gentleman. He's in the right, so far; you're off your beat don't you see?"

There is something peculiar about the touch of the law, after all! Had any one out of uniform touched Barfort just then, in his more than half-crazed condition, a savage blow would almost surely have hurled him back. As it was, Berry jerked back his free arm, but the officer never flinched or lifted his club. His gaze was stern, though respectful, and he needed no other weapon just then.

As for Dr. Dairmid, after calling the attention of the policeman to that wild threat, he turned back to Rena Coventry, kneeling at her side and bending all his attention to restoring her senses.

If these had ever entirely deserted her, they quickly gave signs of returning. A faint, broken sigh came to her lips, and with a hasty word to Clara Sandys, who was still acting like one half-distracted, sobbing hysterically and catching her breath after what, under less grave conditions would have been actually laughable, he lifted that superb figure in his muscular arms, bearing the maiden from the room with as great seeming ease as though she had weighed no more than an infant.

Barfort gave a half-groan, half-curse as he saw his loved one—for it seemed to him as though his love was tenfold stronger now that he had forever lost Rena—held so tenderly yet manfully to that false, evil breast. He started forward as if to tear her away, but the sinewy fingers of the tall policeman closed upon his arm and held him powerless until the physician and his patient had vanished from the apartment. Then, in firm but kindly tones he uttered:

"Will you please come with me, Mr. Barfort? I've got to see you safely clear of the place, you know. Orders is orders with men of the force, and I've got to do it."

Barfort brushed his free hand across his aching eyes, gazing vacantly into that strong face. He seemed like one under the influence of strong drink, and though the officer could detect no scent of liquor, he reasoned that this must be the case.

"You see, sir, if you cut up rusty, I'll have to run you in, and that would be a pity. You're a gentleman. You know we poor devils have got to toe the line mighty close, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to get me into a box by failing in my duty, nor yet to put a bad taste in the mouth o' me by making me give you the collar."

"That devil in—I'll kill him yet!" muttered the poor fellow, never knowing what passed his lips as he sluggishly yielded to the gentle force exerted by the officer.

"You think so now, sir, but you wouldn't have the heart to do it, after all. Steady—so!"

They left the parlor and turned toward the front door, where the footman, pale and uneasy-eyed as he watched the motions of the young man, gave the officer the hat which Berry had left on the rack, then opened the door to give them free exit.

Like one in a dream—nightmare, rather!—Berry Barfort permitted the officer to guide him down the granite steps, along the graveled way to the street. He seemed utterly crushed by the weight of misfortune, and as he watched him more closely, the officer began to alter his first opinion. There was more at the bottom of this than strong drink.

When they reached the street, where travel was never great, and which was entirely free from passers-by at that minute, the officer paused to utter:

"I hope you're not laying it up ag'inst me, Mr. Barfort? I'm on special duty here, and when the marshal detailed me, he said I was to look to Dr. Dairmid—"

The sound of that hated name seemed to act like a restorative on the dazed brain of the young man. He flung back his head as though tossing off a crushing weight, pulling the collar down lower on his neck, drawing a full, deep breath like one just rousing from a troubled and restless slumber.

"What happened in there?" he demanded, with a swift frown, as his eyes were caught by the bright buttons and gleaming badge. "Who are you? Am I to consider myself under arrest?"

"Not a bit of it, sir," briskly responded the officer. "I only come this far to ask pardon for having to do a bit of disagreeable duty. I'm on special—"

Berry Barfort did not wait to hear him out, but turned sharply and strode away at a rapid pace, never once glancing back or toward the house which, up to that hour, he felt held all that made life worth the living to him.

"Taper off, young gentleman!" grimly muttered the policeman, as he shrugged his broad shoulders. "You're a fine sample of our bloods. And I'm only wishing you'll be able to outrun the man with the poker."

He would have been more firmly confirmed in his fancy that *delirium tremens* was on the point of claiming another victim could he have followed Berry Barfort on his trip up-town. And more than one person who met and passed him felt much the same.

That flash of energy did not last long. He had scarcely passed beyond view of the mansion where lived his idol when the dull yet brain-racking stupor once more fell upon him. Not so completely as to deprive him of the power of walking. Not so deeply as to banish the one frail hope to which he could cling: the memory of Dan Dunn and his pledge to see him safely through the slough of despond if mortal wit and mortal courage could accomplish as much.

But while keeping in motion, heading as directly as possible for the Pacific Hotel, where he hoped to find the detective, Berry Barfort looked and acted like a man under the influence of liquor, despite his haggard, almost ghastly countenance. His bloodshot eyes had a glassy, fishlike expression, if expression it may be called, that but served to heighten this impression.

More than once he was greeted by friends in passing, but if he heard them he gave no sign, and with half-smiles and significant nods they would pass on, to tell the next friend they met that Barfort was "slugging the decanter worse than John L.!"

Through all this the unfortunate young man kept steadily—so far as his poor remnant of mind was concerned—to his purpose, and only paused when he reached the entrance to the Pacific House.

It was now well along toward the dinner hour, and as customary there was quite a little group of men and newsboys gathered around the sand-stone steps leading to the main entrance to the hotel. Barfort, with a misty hope that Dan Dunn might be among them, paused to use his eyes, leaning heavily against one of the carved pillars.

He was dimly conscious of being addressed, and he muttered something in response, though what that was he never knew. He saw that his detective friend was not among the number and wearily ascended the steps, making his way to the office, unhearing and unheeding the low comments which followed his passage. Almost without exception he was deemed drunk by his self-constituted judges.

In the office he found, among others, Price Wilkie, over whose big, good-looking face came a shade as he recognized the young man. He associated Barfort with the person for whom he was now asking in a husky voice, and he had not yet recovered from the *contretemps* of the past night. To think! He, the proud, the pompous, the stately, to be caught by ladies in such a humiliating dishabille! It was too much!

And, by way of passing, it was many a long day before the gallant landlord was permitted to forget that adventure by his malicious friends.

"No, sir, Mr. Dunn is not in this house," he stiffly uttered, gazing over the head of the inquirer, which was easy enough, thanks to his herculean proportions and altitude. "I am very sure Mr. Dunn will never come back to this establishment as a guest. His name has been blotted from the register. His duds are packed, awaiting his orders. When you happen to see him, please intimate as much. Good-day, sir! Porter, show Mr. Barfort the way out, please!"

But that was going a little too far, even for Price Wilkie. Where he simply intended to show his sense of injured dignity, he verged on insult, and Berry Barfort flashed up, once more his old self.

"Porter, show Mr. Wilkie where he mislaid his sense of common decency, please!" he retorted, with almost an exact imitation of that ponderous voice, flashing a defiant, yet scornful glance into that flushing countenance, at the same time tossing the grinning negro a dollar.

"Yes, sah; anything else, sah?" murmured the bowing and scraping servant. "Dinner, sah? Take you' hat, sah? Bar, sah? Wight dat way, sah!"

"Never mind Price, sir," wheezed the asthmatic voice of the genial Uncle Jimmy Cable, as he came bustling forward. "He didn't mean it, but—it's all those ridiculous breeches, sir! Ha! ha! Best joke I've met in a hundred years!"

Barfort forced a smile as he brushed past the elder partner, for even in his present wretched state he could not affront Uncle Jimmy; he was everybody's friend, and everybody who ever knew him at all was his friend for life, as well.

The obsequious queries of the porter gave his whirling brain sufficient impetus to carry him from the office in the direction of the billiard-room, where was the bar as well, though he moved in a purely mechanical way, without knowledge or reason.

Now that he knew not where to look for Dan Dunn, in whom it seemed his only trust was to

be placed, that terrible stupor came back with even greater heaviness.

Like one in a dream he made his way to the well-appointed bar, and only came to himself when the flaxen-haired, curled-mustached Adonis behind the mahogany counter gently reminded him that his order was filled, touching the cool glass to his hand.

Mechanically Barfort lifted it toward his lips, but the instant its scent reached his nostrils he hurled glass and all to the floor, rushing out of the big room like one fleeing from Satan himself.

CHAPTER XVII.

A GLIB-TONGUED ABIGAIL.

JUST how and where he passed the rest of that miserable day, Berry Barfort never fully realized, though, in after times he picked up a few points here and there, through which he believed he had been guilty of nothing worse than aimless wanderings in quest of the unfindable.

He awoke the next day in his bed, weak and sick, but in his sober senses. He managed to eat a few bites, then hastened to report at his post of duty. Here his reception was cold, at first, but when he partially confided his troubles to the firm, both of whom had known and loved his dead father, his shortcomings were overlooked, and he was offered a vacation for as long as he wished.

But this kindness Barfort hesitated about accepting, at least until after further reflection. Until he heard from or saw Dan Dunn, he felt that he would be all the better for close employment at other than strictly personal affairs.

But another day came and waned, without word or sign from the detective, and Berry Barfort felt wholly alone in this big world as, just before the dusk of evening, he slowly approached his boarding-place.

Through the general report, he had learned that Knox Coventry "was just about the same," but beyond this he had no information concerning the inmates of Coventry Place. He was fighting with his temptation to make another effort that evening to see and soften Rena, when—

"Thank goodness gracious! I thought you'd never come, Mr. Barfort! I've been waiting and waiting until—if my hair hasn't grown gray as a—*a badger*, then it's a blessed mercy, so it is, now!"

The young man started and stared, at first hardly recognizing that neat, trim little shape, but then his face flushed and his sunken eyes filled with an eager anticipation as he extended both hands:

"Clara—it is you, then? You bring me some message from—"

Rena Coventry's maid shrunk back, her head drooping and something like a whimper coming from her pouting red lips.

"Don't—I'll run away! I'll—I'll—oh, poor, dear Mr. Barfort! Just to think—and him that kind and free-hearted and generous and—is anybody looking, sir?"

The tender-hearted Abigail seemed on the point of going into a display of hysterics when this womanly thought checked her emotions long enough for a quick, half-frightened glance around them lest curious or vulgar eyes were watching; but the young man never noticed her truly feminine tactics. He turned still paler, a sickening dread grasping at his heart and almost depriving him of breath.

"Rena—Miss Coventry—she is not—*she* is well, Clara?" he managed to pant, a dull blur coming before his eyes.

"Too well, sir, if I wasn't her own maid which oughtn't to say it!" almost snapped Clara, all symptoms of hysterics vanishing before the pronouncement of her young mistress's name.

"So well that—if I should be took faintly, sir, promise me you'll hurry on and never notice, nor don't call a policeman unless—but this isn't his beat, sir, and really I'm feeling much better, after all, sir!"

With a strong effort Berry Barfort partially regained his startled composure, and drawing her hand through his arm he moved along in his original course, speaking quickly, almost sternly:

"Did Miss Coventry send a message by you, Clara?"

"Saints above! I should say she *didn't*, sir! Why, if she was to ever find out that I even dreamt of telling you what— But I don't dare do it now I've got the chance!"

There were more signs of hysterics, and Barfort frowned as he cast a swift glance about him. Though the street was comparatively unfrequented at that hour, unpleasant attention might be drawn upon them at any moment. And quickly forming a resolve, he took the first steps toward putting it into execution without asking leave of his companion. And almost before Clara Sandys could divine the truth, she was passing into the front door of his boarding-place.

"Be calm, Clara, unless you want to create a scene," he whispered, as the girl held back a bit about ascending the flight of stairs. "You

have some information which I must receive, whether or no. Be as sensible as you are kind-hearted, and you'll never have cause to regret it!"

Clara deftly shook down her veil until her face was shadowed, and never a word passed her lips until she heard the door of Barfort's chamber close behind them. Then:

"It was just what I needed most, sir, and though I dare say you'll rather abuse than thank me for my pains and trouble and—"

"Tell me about Miss Rena, Clara," eagerly interposed Barfort, as he placed a chair for her accommodation, seating himself on the edge of the bed. "Tell me just what you meant by—How is she? Is there no ray of hope? Is everything indeed lost?"

Clara hung her head a bit, nervously twisting the one glove which she had taken off. She seemed wholly at a loss what to say, or how to put into words the impulse which had led her to lie in wait for the rejected lover of her beautiful young mistress. And Berry Barfort was far too greatly upset to give her the cue she hoped for.

"I never thought it'd ever come to this, Mr. Barfort, sir," she at length desperately made a plunge. "I couldn't believe my own two eyes and same number of ears, sir, but—Miss Coventry is a horrible impostor, sir! She is, if it kills me! So now!"

With an almost ludicrously theatric valor the maid faced the consequence which might follow her treasonable speech, but Berry Barfort could not doubt her entire sincerity, though he felt his heart sink within him. Was it not simple confirmation of his own experience? And who so likely to know the secret truth as this trusted servant?

"What do you mean by that, Clara?" he forced himself to utter.

"That it's a sin and a shame and I don't care who hears me say it, sir! But I trust and hope and pray that you haven't any wicked creatures who prowl around with their two ears glued over your keyhole, sir?" she added, in a hoarse whisper, as she glanced fearfully toward the door. "Not that I care, sir, but I wouldn't wish Miss Rena to know that I'm telling on her, sir! I'd be in mortal fear of my own life!"

Berry Barfort flushed, not altogether with anger at the hint thrown out against his idol. He felt a sense of shame at yielding to this temptation, but he doggedly crushed it down. He would grovel in the very mire if by so doing he could cast any light on the strange alteration in his loved one.

"You've said too much not to say more, Clara," he uttered, with enforced quiet. "You were waiting for me. You have something to tell. I am waiting to hear you. Tell me everything, without reserve, Clara, and you shall never count your time and trouble thrown away."

That there might be no mistaking his meaning, he dropped a bank-note into her lap, and though the maid vehemently declared that she would never, never stoop so low as to touch it, somehow the money vanished from sight while she was making the assertion.

"Miss Coventry is well, Clara?" frowned Barfort at the delay.

"Too well, sir, though you mayn't believe me when I say it. And I was so pitiful for her, poor thing! And I was so angry with you, sir, for causing her such awful pain and distress and fainting and—all the time she was playing off, sir!"

"Be careful, Clara!" flashed Barfort, but with that cruel grip growing tighter and closer about his heart. "You are speaking of your lady mistress who—"

"Who'd nip me to death by inches if she was ever to even dream that I was telling you the solemn gospel truth, sir, and I don't care if the whole united world was to hear me say what she can't deny without—Mr. Barfort, promise me on your sacred word of honor as a gentleman—and you've never treated me like anything else!"

Barfort rose and filled a glass of liquor at the serviceable wardrobe, never saying a word until Clara, under compulsion as she took pains to assert, had swallowed the stimulant. Then he coldly uttered:

"Now drop your nonsense, Clara, and tell me precisely what reasons you had for waylaying me. Why do you accuse your mistress of such harsh things? Why are you turning against her? How has she wronged you deeply enough to turn you against her? Mind, Clara: I want the simple truth; nothing more, nothing less."

Either the strong liquor or this plain speech banished the affectations of the maid, for she spoke directly enough thereafter, with only an occasional lapse.

"Miss Rena hasn't wronged me, sir, in myself, but I couldn't stand finding her out and never letting you know. She was acting all through that scene with you, yesterday. And after you was took away with the policeman, or by the policeman, she fell to laughing over it with that odious doctor who—*it's* gospel truth if you kill me, sir!" shrinking a little from that fiercely-flushing face and glowing eyes.

With a desperate effort Barfort restrained his

mad passions, silently motioning for her to continue.

"You won't believe me, I know, sir, but the change begun even before Miss Rena went to St. Louis. She wanted then to find some fair excuse for getting off with the old love before she took up with the new. And though her poor father is lying on what may be his deathbed this very minute, sir, what do you think?"

"Be careful, Clara!"

"Would I dare to say such a thing if it wasn't Gospel true?" with a touch of offended dignity that lent weight to her words. "When all you've got to do is to use your own eyes to see for your own self what a hideous change has come over her since she fell under the spell of them ugly black eyes which—and I only hope and pray he won't murder you nor me for telling of it, so I do, now."

"You mean Doctor Dairmid, Clara?"

"Him for one, and a perfect stranger to me for another, sir," was the quick response. "And what I wanted to tell you all the time is just this: Miss Rena is going out to the mask ball at New Elm Gardens this very evening that is—*so* there."

Berry Barfort sat like one suddenly turned to stone at this truly astounding declaration. Rena Coventry attend a mask ball at New Elm Garden? *She*—his love, his idol, his all—go to such a low resort? For low it was, at that date, and a place at which no reputable woman was to be seen after dark, and especially at one of the masked dances, though there has been a vast change for the better since.

"Impossible! You are lying, woman!" he gasped at length, springing forward and clutching her by the shoulders, glaring almost madly into her paling face. "Tell me you are lying, or I'll—"

"Murder me if you will, Mr. Barfort," Clara Sandys slowly uttered, unflinchingly meeting his scorching glare. "I'll never lie about it. I swear to you that she is going to the Garden, this very evening!"

Despite his nearly crazed brain Barfort could not doubt her perfect sincerity longer. There was truth in her eyes, in her tones. If there was any mistake—and surely there must be!—Clara Sandys was ignorant of it. She had implicit faith in the foul charge she made against her young mistress.

He released his painful grasp and staggered back to sink upon the bed, covering his face with his trembling hands. This was the bitterest blow of all, terribly as he had been tried of late. It was hard enough to hear Rena Coventry say that she had ceased to love him, but to know that she was so lost to all honor, all modesty, all—

"I will not believe it!" he hoarsely panted, lifting his head.

"Nor would I, if I hadn't heard and seen with my own ears and eyes this very day that is!" sobbed Clara, her composure fleeing. And I *did* love and honor and respect her so awfully! And I blamed you for being so cruel hard-hearted as to— Mr. Barfort," rallying, gazing eagerly at his ghastly-pale countenance through her tears as she added: "You oughtn't to take my bare word for it, sir, when you can see for yourself with so little trouble. Go out to the Garden this very night and look for a navy-blue domino; not a character dress, exactly, but you'll know it by her fine figure and the two red hearts sewed on her shoulders. I put them there with my own fingers, sir, and I said then that I'd tell you how to know her, even if she was to wear a mask!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CARRYING COALS TO NEWCASTLE.

A LITTLE earlier on that same evening, a tall man paused irresolutely in front of Coventry Place, glancing from the building to a bit of paper which he held in one curved palm, then back again. To stroll idly onward the next moment as a strong, dark-garbed figure came out and down the steps toward the street.

This latter personage was Dr. Craig Dairmid, and though he cast a passing glance toward the slouching fellow whose broad back was all he could see, there was nothing of suspicion in the look. And turning in the opposite direction, the doctor strode rapidly away.

"May the foul fiend bear you company, Dairmid!" grimly muttered Dan Dunn, as a covert glance in a little mirror held before him in one palm told him this much. "You turned up just in time, too! I'd rather have you out of the way, but I couldn't waste many more minutes on an uncertainty!"

Dan Dunn, for a certainty, but a vastly different looking creature from the hard-boiled, neatly garbed detective whom we have thus far had to deal with.

He had seen all his neat impostor, and the dexterous use of cosmetic had turned up one end of his mustache, leaving the other to droop naturally, though the whole affair had a painful, straggly appearance. His skin was darkened, particularly about his left eye, which was painted to represent the "genuine hand-painted article," being beautifully blackened as though from a fight in which the seedy-looking sports had come off second best.

He wore a slouch hat, worn and soiled, the soft brim pulled down over his eyes and cocked up behind. His garb was flashy, or had been in its new state; just now it was stained, dingy, apparently on its last legs.

A massive gilt chain hung about his neck and crossed his bosom. Several pinchbeck rings adorned his dirty hands, and his knuckles were spotted by bits of black court-plaster. A big glass "diamond" shone in the broad gilt ring which confined his scarf.

In a word, a really artistic counterfeit of a fourth-rate sport, who aspired to something better, but without knowing just how to carry out that aspiration.

"Now for it, my lady!" he nodded, leaving the pave and striding briskly up the graveled path to the front door. "I'm open to bet long odds that I've marked down the turn, but a man can't pull in stakes until the deal is made. We'll see—what we'll see!"

With a strong hand he tested the bell, putting on an air of nonchalance, with thumbs stuck under his arm-pits as his head went back to let his half-closed eyes take aim along his nose at the footman who answered his bold summons.

"Ah, cully, you ain't paid fer hurryin' yer pegs, is yer?" he drawled insolently as a look of supreme disgust came over that dignified face. "Ef I was boss o' this ranch, reckon I'd stuff ye on quicksilver fer a—stop the music!" at the same time checking the closing door by deftly thrusting his massive, thick-soled shoe into the opening.

"I'll call the police—"

"An' I'll ram four knuckles so far down that red lane that you'll dream you're the lion an' I'm the feller that turned him outside in'ards, cully, ef you don't play heap whiter'n that!" growled the sport, sending out a strong hand to thrust both door and attendant back far enough to admit his person. "Ax me in, like the tony gent I be, why don't ye, critter? Ax me fer me keerd, Johnny-go-slow. Ax me will I take a little wet while the ledgy o' the shebang keeps me waitin' fer to hev time to prim her frizzes an'— Who's chawin' you, cully?"

The frightened servant was turning to seek safety in flight, when he was arrested by that steel grip. The disguised detective whirled him around until they stood face to face, his free hand flipping a bit of dirty cardboard before his face, tickling his nose at each passage.

"Thar's me keerd, cully, an' you want to fetch it back ag'in when the ledgy o' the ranch hain't got no mo' use fer it. Fer why: it's the last rose o' summer, an' frost'll come heap sooner'n I'll git any mo'. See? Sabe? Ketch on, cully?"

"I'll—I'll take it to—" stammered the sorely-frightened flunkie.

"To fetch it back ag'in, mind ye, cully, ef ye don't want me fer to nip off one o' them griddle-cakes you use fer listenin' at keyholes. Mebbe it'd make a keerd, by tannin', ef nobody couldn't turn it into a puss—which is a sayin', ye want to know, cully! An' no—see how mighty lively you kin pick up them buffs o' yours. An' fetch back that keerd, mind ye!"

Thrusting the card into the servant's unsteady hand, Dan Dunn entered the parlor in which Berry Barfort had won and lost his idol.

The curtains were drawn before the windows, but he quickly pushed them back, letting in a mellow flood of light.

"It's risky, perhaps, but what I want is to get a fair look at this beautiful heiress," he muttered, with a grim smile. "That's all I ask: a full, fair view of her face. And if I can only have one side, give me the right, for choice!"

He had time for no more. The servant paused uneasily at the door, card in hand, his tones far from steady as he mumbled:

"Miss Coventry begs to be excused, sir. Miss Coventry does not recognize the name on the card, sir. And—and she told me to—to be sure you didn't take—"

"The house in my pocket when I moseyed, eh?" laughed the detective, as he advanced with a slouch. "Gi' me the keerd, cully, an' I'll stick down me ortographic signature name-title. Never thought o' that, but—Thar!" after hastily making a few marks on the card with a stubby pencil, thrusting it into the reluctant hand of the servant, turning him about with a rush in the direction of the stairs. "Jest peritely hint to the ledgy that ef she don't mind too mighty much, I'll jest wait ontel she kin find time to run down hyar. An' ef you kin pick 'em up handy, cully, mebbe it wouldn't do no hurt ef you was to tote back a little wet in a quart mug an' a little smoked hog in a skin—eh?"

Slowly, but evidently afraid to refuse, the servant made his way up-stairs, and Dan Dunn retreated into the parlor, smiling grimly.

"It's lucky Marshal Croder drew off his special at my request! I reckon Miss Rena Coventry would give me in charge, too quick!"

Taking advantage of the crack at the rear of the partly-opened door, Dan Dunn saw that tall, queenly figure descending the stairs, his soiled card gingerly held between the tips of forefinger and thumb. He saw, too, that her face was colorless, her jaws firm set as though

her teeth were clinched behind those ruby lips.

"It touched her! It is her!" he breathed to himself, silently drawing back where his own face was cast into the shade as the light from the window parted on his broad back. And his face seemed to grow longer, his entire expression to change, until he looked the hang-dog ruffian to perfection!

"You sent me this card, sir?" coldly asked the young lady, as she paused at the entrance, flashing a keen, comprehensive glance over that athletic figure, to linger longest on his face.

"Ef you're Miss Rena Coventry?" with a rude bow.

"I am Miss Coventry. I sent word that I did not know you. I bade the servant show you the door, and—"

"He wanted to show me, ma'am," with a faint grin and another bow, deeper, more fawning than the first. "He said that he hated to do it, but orders was orders, an'—"

"You refused to go? You dared send up this—this card again?" tossing it toward its owner.

"With a bit o' scratchin' onto it, ma'am," deftly catching the bit of pasteboard and glancing at its face as if to make sure he had the genuine one, then slipping it into a pocket.

"Which—mebbe you never tuck notice o' that, ma'am?" anxiously.

"I saw something, but it was all Greek to my eyes. Now—"

With a finger pressed to his lips, the disguised sport stole on tiptoe to the door, peering past the slightly-recoiling lady, and then drawing back with a grin of satisfaction as he saw the footman at his regular position near the front door.

"Now, ma'am, ef you'd stoop so low as to be so kind as to condescend to step this way jest the weeniest mite fer ten seconds or tharabouts, mebbe I mought tell ye a bit o' big news what fetched me all the way from St. Louey by me lonesome self, an'—"

"You have nothing which I care to hear, sir," coldly interposed the young lady, but stepping into the room as she added: "If you are neither drunk nor crazy, I am puzzled to account for your strange and insolent persistence. Must I summon help to eject you, sir?"

Up to this moment Dan Dunn had failed to make sure of his main point in entering the house, for, whether through design, or by mere chance, the lady had kept her right profile turned from him, at least enough to leave him in doubt as to the real facts. But now he passed swiftly past her, finger on lips and eyes aglow as he reached the door, to glance again at the quiet footman.

"Ye see, ma'am," with a low laugh that had in it a curious tinge of grim triumph, "they ain't no trustin' to outside looks when heap big intrusts is consarned. An' though I do reckon I never run up ag'inst a bigger-lookin' idjit then that same, it ain't do no harm to make double-sure. An'—I'm from head-quarters, ma'am," his tones sinking still lower, but every word coming clear and distinct for all that. "I was sent by the head-center—the big mogul—you know?"

"That you surely are crazy!" shrinking back just enough to be noticed. "I will leave you, to send force to drive you into the street."

"I'm goin' jest as soon as I tell you what word was sent by the chief to this house. To you, ma'am, ef I couldn't find—you know who?" doggedly muttered the counterfeit messenger.

"An' that word was this: 'They's a bloodhound on the trail, an' he means business clean through an' back ag'in! He's right here in St. Jo, an' he's got onto the little game the boys is tryin' fer to rush through! An' his name is Dan Dunn—the same durned critter that sent Brocky Sam—'

"I fail to understand you, sir," coldly interrupted Miss Coventry, retreating toward the door, her eyes ablaze but her face white as if carved from snowy marble. "I will listen no longer to your crazy maunderings. If you are not out of this house before I can summon help, I will cause you to be turned over to the police!"

"Don't take all that trouble on my a'count, ma'am," laughed the satisfied detective, bowing with mock humility as he tiptoed after her, but turning toward the front door instead. "I've done what I come all this lonesome way fer, an' now I'm off to kerry back word o' how you see fit to 'ceive the chief's warnin'. Day-day, ma'am! May you never hev a wuss 'ception then this, when you're dry an' hungry an' dead were out fer lack o' sleep! Which is the partin' prayer o' yours to command, ma'am! When I can't help myself, that is!"

The last words were uttered in a little lower tone of voice, but not so low as to escape those dainty ears, as the sudden flush of color testified. And, as if moved by compassion, the young lady hastened after the disguised detective, checking him just as the footman opened the door for his free departure.

"Take this, poor fellow," her voice soft and full of musical pity as she slipped a golden coin into his dirty hand. "I hope you are not crazy,

though you have sadly frightened me. No doubt you thought you were acting all for the best."

"I jest reckon I was, ma'am," with another low bow. "Anyway, let what may come of it, I've done what fetched me here!"

With the yellow coin clutched in his dirty hand, the disguised detective slouched down the granite steps and along the gravel walk, never turning his head to glance back until fairly in the street. Then it was to see the door fast-closed and all quiet at the mansion.

"I'll keep your alms, Miss Rena Coventry!" he grimly laughed, slipping the coin into his pocket, after noting its date. "I'll wear it as a charm against the evil eye! And yet—I could almost wish I had failed!" with a moody frown darkening his face. "What will Barfort say? How will he bear up against what I've got to tell him?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SOFT-HAND SPORT IS DISGUSTED.

A SHADE of sadness and regret came into the face of the disguised detective at this reflection, for the discovery which he had completed while pretending to steal his second glance at the footman back in Coventry Place, was one which he knew must fall with crushing weight on the young bookkeeper.

"I've got as much pride in running a cunning crook to earth as any man born to the profession, I reckon, but—I wished it had proved my memory for faces a lie!"

Dan Dunn was a good friend, and nothing proved the fact better than this wish. For now he knew that he was on the right track. He knew beyond a doubt that the clew which he had accidentally stumbled upon in St. Louis, and painfully relocated in St. Joseph, was indeed the true one. He felt confident now of reaping a glorious success, and destroying at least one important branch of the wide-spreading league of Night Hawks.

"But maybe I could have puzzled it out without running foul of Harlequin Hattie. I would gladly chance it, if only for poor Barfort's sake! It'll break him all up! And I don't know as I can blame him for it, either; to one who has never seen below the shell, Hattie is a darling—a humming-bird right from paradise!"

A low laugh escaped his lips a moment later, as he thought of his daring "bluff."

"Did she see through the paint and dirt, I wonder? Her caution seems to hint that way, for I'm dead sure I sent her the correct signals," drawing the penciled bit of card from his pocket and pausing to scan it by the light of an early lamp on the corner, then to tear it into tiny bits and scatter them far and wide as he resumed his progress.

"Plain enough for a blind Night Hawk to read, and Harlequin Hat was never called short-sighted. She knew me, I reckon, or she would have dropped in a few questions, at least. Well," with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "what matter? I knew it was carrying coals to Newcastle. I knew that Pony Keefe must have spread his discovery broadcast, long ago. And so—I risked only a life, and I won—what? Death to one poor fellow, I'm sadly doubting!"

There was nothing strange in this constant recurrence to Berry Barfort in the detective's mind, since he was now actually on his way to secure an interview with that young gentleman. This, apart from the terrible nature of the discovery which he had made concerning the young woman whom Barfort only knew as Rena Coventry, is quite sufficient to account for his thoughts.

As already stated, Dan Dunn's call at Coventry Place took place on the same evening as the interview between Berry Barfort and Clara Sandys, and at about the same hour. In still plainer words, it was the second evening following the night on which took place the peculiar adventure at the Pacific House, with Pony Keefe.

A much longer interval than Dunn intended when he bade good-night to his friend in trouble, but unforeseen instructions from Headquarters had reached him at an hour which would permit no delay, and after the close espial evidently kept on the movements of the young man, and of which he had already received startling information, he hardly dared send a written message to Barfort, lest it fall by chance into the wrong hands.

"It isn't as if I'd run off and left him entirely friendless," the detective mused, as he briskly strode along. "I hardly think any real trouble can come to him with Robert Turnbull playing shadow, and I found no notice at my new hotel."

As he drew nearer the row of buildings in which Barfort roomed, his pace slackened and his eyes roved keenly about as though in momentary expectation of recognizing some person. But the street for a block or two seemed utterly deserted, and a frown wrinkled his brows.

"Where is he, anyhow? I never knew him to fail me before, yet—"

He broke into a clear, mellow whistle as he lounged past the row of buildings, crossing at the next corner and coming up on the opposite side of the street, seemingly the most careless of tramps, but with every sense on the keenest alert. But there was no answer to his cunning signal, and his frown grew still deeper.

"It's not Barfort's business hours, and it's too early for him to start out after supper. But he isn't in yonder, or Robert would be in sight. What next? Drop it? Wait until morning? Well, hardly!" with sudden resolution as he again approached the boarding-house. "Wonder if I'll shock the bell-boy here as terribly as I did that top-lofty flunky at Coventry Place!"

His summons was promptly answered by a youth in many buttons, and with his hat slouched to shadow his painted eye and the street-lamp shining brightly on his broad shoulders, the disguised detective felt reasonably confident of securing an answer before the young fellow could take alarm at his trampish, sneak-thief appearance.

"Is Mr. Berry Barfort in his room?" he asked, abruptly. "I have an appointment with him, but I may be a little ahead of the hour. If you have no objections I'll just run up to his room and wait."

"He's gone out for the evening, sir," was the hasty interruption.

"You are sure? Did he leave no word for me?" sharply.

"Mr. Barfort didn't, but—may I ask your name, sir?"

"Dunn—Dan Dunn, for short."

"Mr. Barfort didn't leave no word, sir, but another gent did. Leastways he gave me this," taking a sealed envelope from his pocket, but hesitating a little about releasing it. "He said that a gent by that name would be like to call in, and would I—Thank you, sir!"

He eagerly thrust forward both hands, one to deliver the message, the other to accept the silver dollar which Dan Dunn silently offered.

The detective turned away and strode briskly to the corner, where he paused under the gas-lamp to tear open and read the few words which were written on the inclosed slip of paper.

There was no address or name appended of either writer or recipient, but Dan Dunn knew that the first was his most trusted man, the latter himself. And the words ran thus:

"Gone to New Ulm Garden, after talk in rooms with lady's-maid. I have followed him, according to orders."

In the lower corner was added, in small letters, the name and address of a dealer in masquerade goods, costumes, etc.

Memorizing this, Dan Dunn tore his name from the envelope, folding the scrap inside the note, striking a match and using the paper to light a fresh cigar, making sure that only ashes remained when he was satisfied with his light. And with a dark frown on his face he strode away to the address given.

This was readily found, and a glance showed him the little shop was empty. Entering, he laughed softly as the owner regarded him with thinly-disguised suspicion.

"Not a bad get-up, is it, my friend? And yet, don't you know, I rather think I'll be safer with a mask, at least until I feel my way. Give me a plain one; black will answer. And—you don't mind earning a bill about that size?" deftly dropping one of five dollars before the astonished old man. "It won't bite you, sir. And there's nothing worse than a bit of a joke behind it. Berry Barfort came to you for his rig-out, I believe? Well, that's for a plain hint as to his costume."

"But he didn't wear any, that I know of, sir!" replied the bewildered costumer. "Just a plain mask and a long black domino."

"Is that so?" with an air of disappointment, but making no effort toward reclaiming his money. "I hoped it would be something more conspicuous, but maybe I'll smoke him, even so!"

He left the shop and hurried to a livery stable, where a whispered word in the ear of the proprietor quickly brought a bright smile to life, coupled with a hasty order for "Brown Bess" to be put to at once.

"It isn't everybody that I'd trust her to, pardner, for she's worth her weight in minted gold!" the proprietor said, heartily clasping the hand of the disguised detective. "Only weakness is a bit tender about the ears; she don't like 'em for a cent! But even then, if you make her know there's a man pushing on the ribbons, she'll shut her eyes and go over or through 'em like a mule!"

He hurried off himself to hasten the harnessing, and in a very short space of time Dan Dunn was whirling out of the stable, seated in a frail-looking but strong road-wagon, on his way out north of town to the then notorious New Ulm Gardens.

"There's no fool like a jealous lover, and if I had the chance I reckon I'd feel strongly tempted to whisper something to that effect in the ear of Berry Barfort, Esquire!" muttered Dan Dunn, barely above his breath, as he watched the mare and "felt her mouth," studying her

little peculiarities as only a skilled horseman knows how.

A little undersized, one would say, at first glance, and by no means a marvel of beauty to the artistic eye; but before he had driven her a dozen blocks, the detective recognized an animal of no ordinary merit. Wonderfully swift at trotting to be found in a livery stable for hire, full of fire yet answering to the lightest touch of the bit, with room in plenty for the workings of her lungs.

"She'll serve the purpose, I reckon," muttered Dan Dunn, when he had learned this much, little dreaming of all the little mare would be called upon to do and endure before the end of that night's adventures. "If I was only as well satisfied with Turnbull! Why didn't he say more? Why not tell the reason of this break? But maybe he didn't have the time to spare—of course that's it!"

Though the decision left him as much in the dark as ever concerning the real motive which had taken Barfort and his spy out to the Gardens, it gave the detective some satisfaction. His "right hand" had not fallen into such grave fault, after all!

"He couldn't know that Barfort was going to New Ulm, until he shadowed him to the costumers, of course. Then he had to hark back to the boarding-house to leave a sign for my finding. Then to again catch on—good boy, Robert!"

So far all was satisfactory enough, and having reasoned it out to that point, Dan Dunn gave his thoughts to the motives governing his hot-headed young friend.

"It's not so much the going, but the why? I thought he was in too deep trouble for such folly, just now! And then—the lady's maid, eh? Who but saucy Clara Sandys? Did Miss Rena Coventry, alias Harlequin Hattie, send her to call on Barfort?"

Over this and kindred wonderings and doubts, the detective busied his brain while driving out to New Ulm, located in a fairly pleasant valley north of town, several miles from the business part of the city.

Long before he reached the place, he caught the sound of brass instruments, and knew that, early as was the hour, the fun was already waxing fast and furious. He noted the brilliant lights scattered around among the trees, and showing still more clearly roundabout the dancing pavilion.

He drove up near the wide gateway, but preferred to secure his rig outside, rather than take her in to be stabled. There were several other vehicles and saddle-horses hitched hard by, with one or two of the "special police" keeping an eye open against any unlawful appropriation in the dusk, so Dan Dunn felt no reluctance to hitching there. Although he had no particular reason for so doing, he took the trouble to turn around, leaving Brown Bess with her nose pointed toward town.

There was no fee demanded at the gate, and without putting on his mask he entered the grounds, keeping a keen lookout for Robert Turnbull, occasionally making an apparently careless gesture with his hand, like one clumsily trying to keep time with the music. In reality he was giving a signal which he knew Robert Turnbull would instantly recognize in case his eyes caught the gesture. But before he really dared to hope for such a thing, his "right hand" was at his elbow, speaking in guarded tones, but outwardly paying no attention to the shabby sport.

"In the pavilion, watching for some person. I have a ticket, to save time and trouble. Will be at hand, in case of need."

"Good boy, Robert!" hummed Dan Dunn, his fingers closing over the bit of pasteboard as he turned leisurely toward the pavilion.

CHAPTER XX.

NO FOOL LIKE A JEALOUS LOVER.

BERRY BARFORT was fairly stunned by the disclosure made him by Clara Sandys, the confidential maid to Rena Coventry.

He fought against conviction, even while forced to admit that, unless Clara was speaking the simple truth, she looked and acted very much in earnest. And then, as she herself said, how would she dare give utterance to such an atrocious lie, and particularly one which could be so readily tested beyond the question of a doubt?

"It's gospel truth, sir," sobbed the girl, hiding her eyes in a tiny kerchief for a brief space. "It cuts me clean to the bone to say such a cruel thing of such a lovely—tiger-cat, sir!" her eyes flashing fire as the handkerchief lowered. "For she's just that, for all her dainty purrings and her—"

She stopped short as Barfort flung up his hand. She shrunk back, thinking he meant to strike her; it was simply a gesture for mercy to himself, poor fellow.

Every word she uttered against Rena Coventry cut him to the heart with the pang of a dagger tearing to the seat of life. And yet—behind all this lay a still keener pang: the sting of jealousy, that most venomous of all adders!

He swore he would not believe, and yet—believed!

Little by little Clara Sandys completed her recital, giving a glimpse of her real incentive, perhaps, when she spoke of her young mistress's actually striking her in the face. And as proof, when Barfort again recoiled, she called his attention to a discolored spot on her smooth cheek.

It might have been the ghastliest of wounds, and still Berry Barfort would hardly have recognized it. By this time his first stupor was yielding to a fierce, crazy yearning to learn the truth. Ay! if it killed him—and just then he felt that confirmation of this horrible story would surely cause his death—he would probe the matter to the very bottom!

"And if it is true—if she *does* go to that infamous place in company with—did you say Craig Dairmid?"

But Clara Sandys, frightened half out of her wits by his sudden frenzy, was already opening the door, to flee swiftly down the broad steps and through the front door before he could arrest her by word or touch.

"Let her go!" grated Barfort, returning to his chamber and hurriedly securing a loaded revolver from a little trunk in the wardrobe. "I'll see for myself. If she has lied, I'll kill her for traducing an angel so pure and—*If?*" he cried, forcing a laugh that was more painful than groans or curses of despair. "She *did* lie! Rena would never fall so low as to attend a dance at that infernal place!"

He fought hard to make himself believe this, but without altering his sudden resolve to put it to the test without delay. And the more often he swore his blind faith in the purity of the woman whom he had loved so dearly, whom he still so madly worshiped, the oftener he caught himself picturing the dread vengeance which he would hurl upon her disgraced head when he had fully unmasked her.

A far clumsier shadow that Robert Turnbull could have kept him under watch while making his few preparations for the trip to New Ulm Garden. He did contrive to mask his intense emotions while procuring a plain black domino, something after the fashion of a monk's robe and cowl, for even in his madness he tried to avoid awakening suspicions which might, should that horrible tale prove false, cast even the faintest shadow upon the name of his once promised bride.

Great as was his haste, he could not reason clearly enough to look for a horse or a buggy in which to reach the Garden, but waited what seemed an age for a car on the Union Railway. And while waiting thus, as after he sunk into a corner of the slowly-progressing horse-car, slouching his hat over his face to hide his ghastly pale features, his thoughts were turned on Rena Coventry and her possible shame.

For it meant no less, if indeed Clara Sandys had spoken truth.

Of recent years, there has been a change made for the better in the conducting of the pleasure resort popularly known in St. Joseph as "New Ulm." But at the time of which this record of real life treats, matters were far differently arranged.

Not that the Gardens were wholly evil. Many a picnic in the daytime, generally organized by the German citizens, was spent in perfect propriety and innocent enjoyment. But, at varying intervals, the management as then constituted, were wont to give "mask balls," which were about as bad as they could well be.

No respectable woman would even think of attending them. No man of good standing in the community would dare admit that he had taken part in the wild orgies called a ball. Young "bloods" might laughingly hint at sights and scenes in which they had taken part, either as participants or simple spectators, but even they were generally apt to make sure whose ears were drinking in their confessions.

Not one of these "balls" took place without being recorded in red letters. At each and all, at a late or an earlier hour, fights were sure to take place, and more than one grave bear-silent witness against the then-abomination.

It was located beyond the city limits. It was licensed by the county for a term of years, and even in the darkest cases, it was difficult if not impossible to secure witnesses who would testify to the truth. And the then-management would point to their long list of "special policemen" as a surety against disorder.

To such a place, then, Clara Sandys declared Miss Rena Coventry was going that night, escorted by—whom?

"I'll know!" with a vicious click of his teeth which caused a nervous passenger to start and draw up his feet as he glanced under the seat for a stray cur. "And—he'll know!"

Poor fellow! With all his faults—and they have been forced to the surface in this chronicle through peculiar circumstances—Berry Barfort was kind and honest-hearted. Yet he had murder seething in his veins this night.

When the end of the route was reached, Berry Barfort descended from the car and walked hastily on to the Gardens. He paused outside the gate, as did others who came on the same car with him, to unroll his disguise and slip it on, covering his face with a plain cloth mask

before passing through the gateway into the grounds.

With the many lanterns and lights scattered about the grounds, marking the shooting-stands, the "ring game" and a thousand and one similar schemes for gathering in the loose coin of the guests, Barfort had nothing to do, though under different circumstances the scene might have given him a degree of amusement. He hastened at once to the pavilion and paid for a ticket admitting him to the dance-room.

Even this early the floor was fairly crowded, couples in almost every garb, ancient and modern, rich and shabby, rags and laces, were swiftly circling in time to the really good instrumental music. And around the edges others were gathered, laughing, smoking, drinking, chatting as though resolved to gain the most possible amusement before the inevitable "circus" should open.

Fearing, doubting, yet ever watching for that superb figure which he knew he could recognize even without the distinguishing marks given him by the faithless maid, Berry Barfort never noted the progress of time. He could not have told whether he had been but an hour, or if an eternity had elapsed before a galvanic shock ran through his frame, driving the hot blood to his brain with such force that a red mist overspread his vision and caused him to reel back, kept from falling at full length only by a post near the edge of the pavilion.

With a desperate effort he fought back this blindness, and unconscious of the fact that, in seeking breath, he had torn off his mask, Barfort once more sought for that couple, one of whom he knew was none other than his false, fallen betrothed.

The couple had passed him by during his dizziness, but he soon caught sight of their forms as they floated gracefully amid their less accomplished companions of the waltz. He noted the navy-blue garb, and even caught a passing glimpse of a small spot of blood—so it seemed to him then—on the shoulder of the woman as she turned in the dance. Her face was closely masked, as was that of her companion; not Dr. Craig Dairmid, for this figure was too tall to be the physician.

He was dimly conscious of reasoning thus, but then his whole attention was given to the woman. The dance was bringing the graceful couple nearer his position, and forgetting all else in his awful grief, Barfort unconsciously pressed forward, inch by inch, until—

Just while a slow turn brought the woman's face toward him, Barfort noticed her start and lose step, hastily lifting a hand to keep her loosened mask from dropping down and leaving her features exposed to view of those about them.

Her partner deftly swung her out of the circle, pausing almost within arm's-length of Berry Barfort; so near that he could distinctly recognize the tone of the woman as she laughingly spoke to her mate.

And it was the voice of Rena Coventry!

CHAPTER XXI.

HOT WORK WHILE IT LASTS.

"Just think! if my mask had really fallen!"

"Just think! how that dazzling revelation would have forever blinded one and all whose eyes beheld the forbidden fruit!"

Commonplace enough the words were, and probably even more extravagant speeches were being made by masculine lips to feminine ears at that very moment; but Berry Barfort never knew what the words themselves were. All he heard were the voices—the voice, rather!

For, despite the savage jealousy which had made him when he first learned that tall, graceful yet athletic figure whose arms were joined about the form of the woman who had been—and still was!—more than all the world else to his heart, Berry Barfort forgot the very existence of the man in his breathless, frightful yet strangely fascinating scrutiny of the woman in blue.

In cooler and saner moments he would unhesitatingly have sworn to perfect recognition of that superb figure. In some respects he had an artist's eye, and surely he had studied that face and shape sufficiently long and thoroughly to enable him to recognize it at once and under any disguise! He recognized it now, and almost the instant his eyes rested upon the couple.

Yet—it was so horrible! It was soul-murder to even think of such a being as Rena Coventry in such vile company and viler place!

He forgot all else. He saw nothing but that one glorious shape, rhythmically floating nearer and nearer the place where he felt bound by a spell such as only death itself could break. For the instant he even forgot her degrading surroundings as he mechanically moved forward, inch by inch, unconscious of the fact himself. He only knew that he was gazing upon the figure of the woman whom he loved to madness.

Then he noticed her start, and an electric shock seemed to pass through him. He believed Rena Coventry had caught sight of and recog-

nized him. He saw her hand swiftly rise, and he believed it was in a plea for mercy, until he saw it hold her loosened mask more securely over her face.

Was it fate that broke his stupor just at that juncture? Was it fate that led to the trifling—in itself—accident just as the circling waltz brought them nearly opposite where he stood in wait?

Berry Barfort believed it must be so, and this belief in a measure prepared him for the voice which he so surely recognized: the voice of one whom, up to that night, he had deemed pure and unsullied even in her lightest thought as an angel in heaven: the voice of the woman to whom he had given his purest, strongest, best part of life: the voice of Rena, daughter of Knox Coventry!

He knew that he could have made no mistake. It was a horrible certainty. The whole world contained no other such voice, to his ears. Yet—he fought against conviction, even while doing all that lay in his power to bring the frightful truth to light.

Without a sound or word by which his purpose could be divined and guarded against, Barfort sprung forward and with a sweep of his hand fairly tore that sable mask from the fair face of—God of pity!

The face of Rena Coventry.

"False—false as hell!" came hoarsely from the pallid lips of the crazed lover, and now that doubt could no longer fight for an existence, his fingers curved into claws with which to tear the other mask away; the semblance of innocence, of purity, of true womanliness, by means of which she had forever wrecked his life.

With a faint shriek the unmasked woman shrunk back, deftly covering her face with the ends of the scarf which she wore, and her athletic companion stepped swiftly between her and Barfort, sending his tightly-clinched fist in advance, backed by all the weight of his broad shoulders.

Barfort was knocked clear off his feet and through the instinctively-dividing ranks, to fall heavily on the polished floor.

"You cur!" thundered the masked stranger, as he whipped forth a gleaming revolver and followed the falling form with the muzzle. "I'll teach you what it is to insult a lady while under my—"

A shabbily-dressed figure shot in between the weapon and its intended victim, and almost as loud and fully as clear as his own tones came the stern words:

"I want you, Horace Haylock!"

The tall mask visibly recoiled, and it seemed as if he tried to turn his weapon upon this new actor, but if so, his time was too short.

Dan Dunn ducked his head out of range, at the same time striking a swift blow forward and upward, his knuckles coming in contact with the wrist of the pistol-hand, benumbing it and sending the weapon itself circling brightly through the lamplight, to fall harmlessly in the midst of the startled dancers.

Only for that—only for having to check his rush in order to save his own life—the detective would have closed with his prey before a hand could have lifted to interfere. As it was, the tall mask recovered sufficiently to leap aside, at the same time giving vent to a shrill whistle which the detective instantly recognized. It was the danger-call of the Night Hawks!

"Down him, lads! down them both!" shrilly shouted the mask, as he darted away through the confused crowd, his eyes fixed on a dark-blue dress as it deftly slipped away through the jam.

Like an echo burst a clear signal from the lips of the detective, as he turned to strike aside those who were crowding in between himself and the prostrate Barfort.

"Don't lose your knife again, Kid!" he grimly laughed as he recognized the dandy crook within long arm's-length, and struck him between the great blue eyes, hurling him endlong into the fat stomach of a stupefied mask just beyond.

A leather-covered slung-shot hummed viciously past his ear, just touching the skin of his cheek and seeming to sear it as if red-hot, then curving down to resound on his chest as its further flight was checked by the thong about the wrist of its ruffianly user.

"You, too, cully?" cried Dan Dunn as he half-turned, to send his fist straight into the ugly face of Mace Wilson. "Now I have hit you fair, pardner!"

So far it is possible to give the details, for even those who had apparently been ready and waiting for the "circus," seemed taken aback by its sudden outburst, and thus far they had acted independently, so far as they had taken action at all. But now the evil gang began to act in concert, as though determined to carry out the shrill commands of the tall mask.

Dan Dunn anticipated this from the outset, and had taken what measures he could to guard against being worsted, though he had not reached the Gardens in time to make his precautions of much avail.

He knew now, what he had only suspected before: that Berry Barfort had been lured into a trap from which he was never intended to escape

with life. And knowing this, his first thoughts were given to that luckless personage.

Having partly cleared the way by temporarily disabling at least two of the evil gang, Dunn sprung to where Barfort lay like one dead, still insensible from the effects of that terrible blow. And with a heavily-loaded, supple-handled billy gripped in his left hand, he faced the Night Hawks as they surged forward.

One burly ruffian reeled back with flattened nose, and a mate went down at the same time, his senses knocked out if his brains were saved by the thickness of his skull. And for a score of seconds it seemed as if the blackened-eyed sport possessed a dozen arms, each one filled with the power to knock strong rascals right and left.

But no one man could long withstand such a savage rush, let his powers be what they might, and none too soon did the detective's "right hand" perform the duty assigned him.

With a crash and a jingle of breaking glass the central chandelier fell to the floor, almost in the midst of a frightened bevy of shrieking women and bewildered men, the oil spreading swiftly, and the angry flames leaping up with a dazzling glare!

In swift succession two other clusters of lamps were cut down, the fall of each adding greater terror and confusion to that which already reigned almost supreme. Even the Night Hawks were disconcerted, and scattered like chaff before the frantic rush of the less guilty participants in that eventful masquerade.

"Police! Croder's making a raid!"

It was the voice of Robert Turnbull, but only Dan Dunn recognized it then, and into his painted face there came a grim smile at the very audacity of that expedient. He knew—and so would those rascals, when they took time for a sober thought—that the city marshal had no right to lead such a raid as this wild yell heralded.

But the very audacity of the ruse proved its success, and with cries and curses of angry fright, the stampede became almost general.

Freed from his close-pressing enemies, Dan Dunn stooped and picked up the limp body of Berry Barfort, swinging it across his shoulder as though its weight was naught.

A single glance showed him in which direction the gang was for the most part fleeing, and though it gave him a greater space to cover in the bright light, he unhesitatingly dashed across the floor, now beginning to blaze up from the broken lamps, leaping to the ground at the opposite end of the pavilion.

Even as his feet left the flooring, he caught the rallying yell of the Night Hawks, and knew that he was still far from safe. If Berry Barfort was only conscious! if he could only use his legs for flight, his hands for fighting.

The course he had deemed best to take placed the pavilion almost directly between them and the gate, just outside of which was hitched his gallant little mare, Brown Bess. Only for that! If he could only gain the wagon, he would ask no further odds.

All this flashed through his brain with the rapidity which only such peril can inspire, and by the time his feet touched the ground, after leaping from the pavilion, Dan Dunn was cool and clear-witted as ever, ready to catch at and improve the slightest chance for life and liberty.

Although the detective could not be sure of it, Robert Turnbull had never lost sight of his chief, even while busiest at work. And now, that work accomplished as far as lay in his power, the gallant little fellow still further proved his value as an aide.

"Cover, boss!" he cried in guarded tones, as he dodged along under shelter of the shrubbery so as to intercept his chief. "They're coming hot-foot, but try if we can't swap off on 'em!"

There was no time for full speech, but Dan Dunn instantly divined the scheme which the wiry little detective had in view, and at once acted upon it. He leaped into the thickest part of the bushes, then turned abruptly to the right, crouching as low as the nature of his burden would permit, running swiftly for a few yards, then pausing where two trees rose from the same root, dropping Barfort to the ground and drawing a brace of revolvers.

The time for child's play was past, and from this time on he meant to give full value to all who claimed it by crowding him. So far he had dealt blows, not to kill but to save life.

The instant he saw that his chief caught his idea, Robert Turnbull began to act his part, veering to the left in an abrupt angle, sending out the peculiar rallying cry of the Night Hawks, following it promptly with a ringing yell as he added:

"This way, mates! Yonder they go—dunn 'em all!" again altering his course a point as he caught sight of several frightened maskers in frantic flight through the scattered trees, fearing arrest and consequent exposure as witnesses, if nothing worse.

And with savage yells and oaths and threats, the evil gang fell blindly into the audacious snare, still led on by the wiry lure, unconscious that every second thus wasted was being improved to the utmost by their most dreaded enemy in trying to preserve the life which they had been sworn to extinguish that very night.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHASE BY MOONLIGHT.

DAN DUNN saw that the ruse of his noble little aide was working far better than he had dared to hope, but he also knew that any moment might show the Night Hawks how thoroughly they were being fooled.

"Then they'll be hotter than ever!" with a short, hard laugh, as he put up his pistols and bent over the prostrate form at his feet.

As he did so, a faint groan came to his ears, and Berry Barfort made an attempt to regain his feet. Dan Dunn encouraged him in this, at the same time time pressing a small pocket-flask to his lips. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Barfort swallowed a little of the brandy, but the fiery taste itself did far the most to revive him, through disgust.

"Not that—never again!" he hoarsely gasped, spitting angrily. "It brought me to this—Merciful heavens!" with a bitter groan as the awful truth flashed back upon his wakening brain.

"Brace up, pardner," sharply uttered Dan Dunn. "It was all a lie, I tell you! Nothing but a cunning bit of trickery!"

"You think—"

"I know—that if we don't get out of this cursed hole in two minutes, we'll never leave it on our own legs! Come—if not for your own life, then to save mine!"

With one strong arm about the still weak and trembling young man, a weapon ready in the other, his keen eyes ever on the alert, Dan Dunn hurried away toward the gate in haste to reach his rig before the gang could discover the will-o'-the-wisp dance which Turnbull was leading them.

Fortune favored him in this, though wild curses and yells came from about the miniature lake beyond the pavilion, just as they passed through the wide entrance in company with a number of others. Almost certainly the Night Hawks had discovered the trick, or their mistake, however that might prove to be. But Dan Dunn actually swung Barfort into the seat, then snapped the halter and sprung after him. And as the little brown mare plunged forward through the moonlight, the detective laughed exultantly.

"Sold again! and we never paid the cost, neither!"

As the words passed his lips, Dunn glanced over his shoulder, but there were no signs of organized pursuit. Though the enemy had doubtless discovered their mistake, it was clear that they had not as yet picked up the lost scent.

"When they do, I'll not have a lifeless handicap on my back!" nodded the detective, his teeth clicking audibly as he looked ahead.

To suddenly tighten the ribbons, for a dark figure dashed out into the road just ahead of the little brown mare, and for an instant Dan Dunn believed at least one of his enemies had headed them off.

"Never mind pulling up for me, boss!" came the cheery voice of Robert Turnbull, as he flung up a hand to push back his slouched hat. "Let her went! I'll take a back seat for once!"

He deftly swung himself in at the rear, sitting with his feet curled tailor-fashion beneath his body, his breath fanning the cheek of his chief as he muttered:

"They smoked the trick, but not the little joker, boss! But that goes without saying since I'm here without being carried!"

"I've got it all down, Robert," gravely responded the detective, just flashing a single glance back to that thin, middle-aged face. "But I'm sorry for one thing: that I called the chief by name, without running him in at the end of it!"

"Maybe you'll do that yet, boss," with a touch of grim triumph in his tones as he thrust an arm past the face of his chief. "If I hadn't thought as much—I could have dropped the fellow with a pill, just as easy!"

"What! you surely don't mean to say—"

"That our game—both man and woman—are in yonder carriage not a quarter ahead of us. Mr. Dunn!" quickly but positively interjected the little shadow, his thin forefinger covering a rapidly-moving object in their front, hardly to be distinguished as a carriage under the moonlight and the dust which hung over the unpaved road.

The little brown mare squatted low as the lash touched her flank, then dashed ahead, trotting smoothly but with marvelous ease and rapidity, considering the load she was drawing. Dan Dunn fixed his gaze on the spot indicated by Turnbull for a few moments, to measure their chances of overtaking the fugitives while thus heavily handicapped. And a short, metallic laugh crossed his lips as he noted how steadily they were gaining ground.

"She can do it, I reckon, Robert, unless they play whip livelier than they are now doing. You keep an eye on them. I don't want to snap a spoke or wrench a wheel in this rough track!"

From that moment he never gave another look to the carriage in front until after the smoother streets inside the city limits were reached,

trusting Turnbull to guide him aright, and giving all his care to the little mare and the vehicle.

Fortunately for all concerned, perhaps, Berry Barfort hardly comprehended the full meaning of the words his companions uttered. Once more that dull, sleepy stupor was creeping over his brain. Once more he was yielding to the terrible blows he had received of late.

He sat steadily on his seat, but that was all. He never once thought of Rena Coventry being in the carriage ahead of them, though an occasional glimmer of curiosity as to the outcome would flit across his half-paralyzed brain when he dimly recognized the fact of the race; but that was all, during the earlier portion of the chase.

Not until the suburbs were fairly entered did the persons in the carriage—an open phaeton, with a driver on the front seat and a man and woman in the other—seem aware of the chase. The man rose up to look back, and as the little brown mare dashed past a brilliant light, he seemed to recognize the detective, for he sunk down quickly, and the driver began to use his lash in earnest, sending his spirited team ahead with a dash that slowly but perceptibly lessened the gains so far made by their enemies.

"Shall I take the ribbons, Mr. Dunn?" softly asked Turnbull.

"Not yet," instinctively divining the purport of that query. "I want them all alive and sound in limb. I'll shoot only as a final resort."

The little brown mare did nobly, trotting as free and as fast as at the start, despite her handicap in weight. And then, after a few more blocks had been passed, she once more held her own with the pair ahead.

As though to guard against being halted by the police for unlawful speed, the phaeton kept to the darker, more secluded streets, their evident hope being to eventually distance pursuit. But they undervalued the little mare. She hung to the scent like a brown ghost!

Dan Dunn smiled grimly as he saw the fugitives turn into Ninth street, and he wondered if they would have the audacity to draw up at the Coventry mansion; but the phaeton dashed straight on, as though its occupants had not the slightest interest in the building.

Down Ninth into the level bordering that portion of the city popularly known as Pateetown, dashed the fugitives, and after them, less than three squares to the rear, sped Brown Bess, sending jets of vapor from her distended nostrils, but in no other wise betraying her exertions.

Dan Dunn paled a bit as he recalled what the owner said about the one only weakness of the little mare. He knew that, night and day, there was considerable switching and making up trains going on, both at the depot grounds, for the narrow gauge and for the bridge across the Missouri River.

His jaws squared even more as he saw the fugitives turn to the right, apparently guessing or hoping something of the truth. And he muttered a word of warning to his companions as the little mare tossed her head and snorted sharply at the shrill whistle of a train, just then backing in from the bridge switch.

He saw the driver ahead playing his whip in lively fashion, plainly intending to cross the track before the train could shut them out. Which he did, with considerable room to spare, but Dan Dunn was forced to rein in. Even with the steadiest sort of animal, he could not make the crossing in time.

"Can't we cut around and strike the trail ahead?" asked Turnbull.

"If we knew they didn't mean to cross the bridge!"

There was a possibility of that, and Turnbull leaped out to run ahead on foot and guard against such a fatal mistake. And then, as Dan Dunn plied whip and forced the frightened mare across the track at the earliest possible moment, fearing to be again cut off by the train, the active little shadow regained his seat behind, saying:

"They've kept right ahead. Wonder where they're making for?"

There was no reply. Dan Dunn was too anxious to make up for lost time, and the same incentive seemed to cause the little mare to fairly fly. Once more they sighted their game, and once more began to draw closer and closer to—what?

By this time the town was fairly cleared, and it seemed certain that the fugitives were thinking of trying the open country again, and a few minutes later Dan Dunn ejaculated in grim triumph:

"If they're heading for the lake, they'll have to take the Bluff road!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW THE CHASE CAME TO AN END.

DAN DUNN spoke this sentence almost entirely on the evidence of his own ears, for just then all his care was demanded by the frightened little mare. Though no alarming whistle was splitting the air, the short, sharp pantings of a switch engine were to be heard, and just in her

front the moonlight glistened upon a double line of friction-polished rails.

Without looking the detective knew that the train was not being made up on this line, but further ahead, where the road they were following made an abrupt bend to the right, or west.

"If you had neither eyes nor ears, wouldn't you be a darling!" he muttered, half in fierce rage, half in admiration for the gallant little creature who had borne them so far and so fast.

"Bluff road or a fight!" laughed Robert Turnbull, his small hands closing like twin vises on the muscular shoulders of his chief, as the light wagon swayed and leaped wildly as the mare bounded across the feared track. "They can't make it, for—'Holy smoke!' his tones rising almost to a shout as he started to his feet, regardless of his own peril in his intense excitement. 'He's going to try it!'"

At that moment the fussy but powerful little engine sent forth a rapid succession of shrill, maniacal screeches in warning, and with them blended another shriek—the voice of Rena Coventry!

Berry Barfort heard and recognized this, even amid that wild and ear-splitting concert. It broke the curious torpor which had dropped upon his brain when he learned the worst concerning this once-idolized creature. And with that mad love seemingly revived in full force, he gave vent to a choking cry at once warning and appealing.

"Steady him, Bob!" grated Dan Dunn, his own hands full in controlling the dancing mare, keeping her from whirling short to the left and upsetting or smashing the rig.

But Turnbull required no directions. Already his wiry arms were flung over the shoulders of the awaking lover, holding him powerless, rendering it impossible for him to rise, and in case of need able to weaken him in a single breath by shutting off that valuable adjunct, one bony wrist forming a perfect garrote.

"God of mercy!" gasped the half-crazed lover, as he for the first time fully realized the peculiar situation. "Save her—save her from—She will be crushed to death!"

And so it seemed to both Dan Dunn and Robert Turnbull just then.

The switch-engine was backing down a long line of freight-cars, engaged in its almost incessant duty of making up trains, and though it still kept up a constant succession of warning yelps, the engineer did not see fit to check the speed of the cars in the least, perhaps because he was fully aware how universally understood were the perils of "the Death Trap," as this particular crossing was called. And no doubt he expected to see both teams turn off into the other road, or else draw rein to wait for a more favorable opening for crossing over the double tracks.

But the driver of the phaeton, doubtless urged on by the man whom Dan Dunn had called Horace Haylock, lashed his spirited team furiously and sent them at a full run up the slope, bent on placing for the second time a serious barrier between themselves and their pursuers.

Only a man drunk, mad or thoroughly desperate would have risked the feat, for failure meant certain death, and the crossing was by no means an easy one under the most favorable circumstances. Should one or both of the horses slacken speed, should one or both flinch or balk at rails or because of that truly diabolical screeching, death and mutilation alone could be the result.

And not only this, but—

"They can't do it! And this ends our trail, Robert," gratefully cried the detective, something like a shiver running through his frame.

"Whip, you devil!" panted Turnbull, unconsciously shouting the guiding words aloud. "You've got to—did they—didn't they?"

For a moment even his ferret-eyes were at fault, so terribly close was the rearmost car to the swaying phaeton as its wheels bounded over the double-track, to be lost to sight and—

"Safe, by the eternal!" added Turnbull, as there floated to their ears a loud, mocking shout from the further side of the crossing. "By the skin of their teeth, boss!"

"Lost! by the ears of this infernal brute!" exclaimed the detective, cutting Brown Bess viciously with the lash, causing her to change from dancing to racing, but with his powerful sinews forcing her to make a graceful curve that saved them from wreck.

"Maybe not lost," laughed Turnbull, holding Berry Barfort and himself in the wagon by skill and strength combined. "Maybe only gone before, a bit! I can keep on the scent, if you like, sir."

"Do it—we'll follow just as soon as possible," hastily uttered the detective, instantly divining the purpose which his cunning man had in view.

Without another word Turnbull relaxed his grip on the young man and dropped over the back end of the wagon, running swiftly back to the crossing, where the long line of freight-cars had almost come to a pause, blocking all passage, as it appeared. But the human shadow never paused in his rapid pace, springing up and

catching an end-ladder with one hand and a brake-rod with the other, lifting himself and shooting through the narrow space between two cars as adroitly as Harlequin ever penetrated a star-trap.

The more perfectly to comprehend what has passed, as well as to understand what is yet to be narrated, a few lines of description must find place right now and here.

As stated, the chase had led through the city, from its northern to its southern extremity. At that time the present system of stock-yards was only a dream of the future.

Four miles to the southwest of St. Joseph lies Lake Contrary, once noted for its rare good fishing, and ever noted for its abominable means of approach.

After leaving the city behind, there were two roads by which (when rains had not spread a bottomless sea of mud, too thin for hoofs, too thick for keels) the lake might be reached. One was known as the Bluff road, rocky, hilly, thoroughly disagreeable; the other the Bottom road.

These two roads divided near the lower end of the machine-shops, which occupy the larger portion of what was originally the Exposition grounds, the first named following along the edge of the towering range of hills, the other making an abrupt turn to the west, leading over the two tracks entering the yards from the south.

These tracks are only a few feet apart, and run along an earthen ridge some ten feet above the level on the northern side, and still higher above the southern exposure.

For several rods one driving from town to the lake, must keep close along the roads, then turn sharply up and over the unguarded rails, to descend and pass between the still standing high board-fence of the old Exposition grounds on the right, and the fence of a field on the left, forming a narrow lane that extends for some little distance, making extremely close quarters for a skittish horse.

To make matters still worse, every train that is made up, must, time and again, be pulled or pushed past this crossing, frequently for half an hour at a stretch completely blocking the way. And owing to the difficult approaches on both sides, no less than the narrow space on the level raise, where teams are unable to pass each other without almost surely locking wheels or risking a wreck in the ditch, which, on either hand, speedily splits the two tracks, this crossing has for years been termed the "Death-Trap."

With a cleared space for maneuvering his frightened beast, Dan Dunn could spare one hand to restrain Barfort while trying to make him realize the situation, keeping the brown mare circling around or turning in graceful curves, thus the more surely guarding against a perilous plunge as that diabolical engine sent out its ugly screeches, and at the same time holding everything in readiness for a desperate dash over the crossing the instant an opening should be presented.

"Brace up, mau! You've got to!" the detective harshly cried, gripping his half-crazed friend until it seemed as though his finger-tips must pierce holes through his garments.

"I saw her! She's dead—mangled under the cruel wheels!"

"You lie, Barfort!" persisting in seeing what pain in body and harsh speech would effect. "They got safely across the track, but she's ten thousand times worse than dead if you don't brace up and help me to tear her from the power of that devil in human shape!"

Again that ear-splitting screech half-crazed Brown Bess, who was just circling around to face the little monster as it came puffing and spitting fire down to hitch on to the train once more, having cast its first batch of cars off on a flying switch. Again Dan Dunn won the victory, though only after a tough struggle.

But the time was not entirely lost. Those fiercely impatient words of the detective had made an impression on the tortured lover, and he was already beginning to rally his wits and his powers of body.

"Tell me—I'll do what you say," he managed to utter with a touch of his old-time energy. "Anything to save—"

"Then take the ribbons and hold the little devil!" grated Dan Dunn, as he leaped to the ground and caught Brown Bess by the head, holding her helpless with his steel-like arms though her head was now facing the moving train.

With marvelous celerity Dan Dunn stripped off the coat he wore and wound it tightly around the mare's head, effectually blinding her.

"Ready with the whip if she balks when I say the word, pardner! And if worst comes, jump where you think you'll land softest. We've got to get over that infernal— Look at that!"

A genuine curse hissed through his teeth as he saw the engine take away two cars, leaving the way still blocked and the end seemingly as far off as ever! But then, as the engine gave another whistle, differently modulated and divided, he jumped at a conclusion which was not

far from the truth, though he resolved to make still more sure.

"Keep her level, pard!" was all he stopped to say, darting forward and reaching the train, with difficulty extracting the bent coupling-pin from a car which stood nearly half over the crossing.

This done, he rushed back, leaping into the wagon and taking the lines just as the cars began to bump-bump-bump one against the other as the engine backed up and hitched on, the shock sending that portion of the train back of the uncoupled car slowly grinding along the rails. And then, as the dummy, or pony-engine puffed ahead, thinking to draw up the whole string nearer the upper switches, Dan Dunn plied whip until the velvet skin was scored to the quick, sending the blinded mare up the slope, over the iron rails and beyond, his exultant yell mingling with the angry shouts of the brakemen and the vicious screeches born of the indignant "pony" driver.

"More ways than one to kill a cat, pardner!" laughed Dan Dunn, his face growing harder and colder as his keen eyes failed to catch even a glimpse of their valuable game.

The fugitives had busily improved the advantage won at such imminent peril, and had already cleared the long lane.

"But Robert is on their track, and if they don't run far enough to burst his lungs, he'll track 'em to their nest!"

Barfort asked something, but if Dan Dunn heard, he never heeded or made reply. He was sending Brown Bess at dangerous speed over the narrow, single-track road, hardly worn smooth since the last rains, and he needed all his skill and wits to guard against a catastrophe.

Through the lane, out to where the ever-hungry river had swallowed up farm after farm in its annual floods, and where it was now hourly eating huge bites out of the sandy soil. Twice that season the fence on the left of the road had been moved, and for the third time it was in danger of going down-river. But where the space was narrowest Dan Dunn saw fresh wheel-tracks, and urged Brown Bess forward, reckless of danger in his lust for capture. Then—the earth seemed to be yielding to their weight and swallowing them bodily!

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE MAW OF THE MAD MISSOURI.

WITHOUT the slightest warning sound, a huge mass of undermined soil was torn from its resting-place, just as the fast-trotting little mare reached the center of the slide.

As Dan Dunn felt the wagon tipping sharply, he divined the awful truth and let the lines slip loose, striking Brown Bess a vicious blow across the back, hoping against hope even yet. And with a wild scream the mare plunged forward and away from the river, pawing furiously at the crumbling earth with her hoofs—but all was in vain!

And realizing this, Dan Dunn caught Berry Barfort in his arms and hurled himself as far away from the horse and vehicle as that one second would permit.

Even this would not have been granted him, had the slide been of less magnitude; ten feet wide and half a hundred long, in fact. If it had been less, there would have been no time for struggling or even thought!

And even as it was, the two men were dashed into the sullen river with enough sand and dirt showering over them to bury a score, only for the swift current which as rapidly dissolved its particles.

The mad plunge separated the friends, despite the desperate grip which Dan Dunn had fastened upon Barfort, and the detective, strangling and half-suffocated, more from the shock than aught else, was the first to reach the surface.

His hat was gone, his hair clipped too short to interfere with his eyes, but they seemed filled with sand, and too much blinded to see aught of his surroundings.

A sweep or two of his wet hands sufficed to clear his vision partially, and then—neither horse, wagon nor friend were visible!

Though the current was sweeping him rapidly down-stream, his immersion had not lasted so long but that he could mark the point where that frightful plunge had taken place; but that was all! He alone appeared to have survived that deadly slide.

Even as the dread belief flashed into his still dizzy brain, Dan Dunn caught sight of a pale facerising into the bright light of the full moon, and with a wild cry he recognized the face of his friend!

There was no answer. There came no motion, no signal in recognition. And then, suddenly as it had appeared, that white face faded away, the yellow waters covering it over as with the pall of death!

With an effort that raised his body more than half out of water, Dan Dunn shot forward, turning over to sink below the surface, sweeping his limbs about in fierce energy in hopes of touching if not clutching the drowning man. And just when he was on the point of rising for lack of breath, one foot struck a sinking object.

That was enough; With a desperate effort the

detective turned head downward and grasped the body, bringing it to the surface with him.

A few gasping gulps of grateful air, then Dan Dunn gave his efforts to Berry Barfort, holding his head above water. He could do no more, but fortunately that proved sufficient for the time.

It was because the terrible concussion with the water had driven the breath out of his body, that the young man sunk helplessly. And now that the needed air entered his lungs, compressed by the strong arm of the detective one moment, then to slacken the next, his never entirely-lost senses began to return to their duty.

"Steady, pardner!" panted the detective, as Barfort instinctively began to struggle, threatening to drown them both in their weakened state. "Ficat and trust to me, or Rena Coventry is lost forever!"

He had spare breath for no more, just then, but he counted on the magic of that loved one's name, and it did not fail him in this crisis. Those aimless struggles ceased, and Barfort turned his head with a gleam of understanding in his eyes.

Dan Dunn saw a half-submerged log floating alongside them, only a few feet away, and he managed to gain this, to which they both clung in gratitude. It was floating perilously close to the washing bank, but for the moment neither man had a thought for that. Each moment of this support was adding to their recovery.

The current was rapidly sweeping them downstream, but that could not be avoided, though land was so near them: not twenty feet away, in fact; but so far as escaping from the water, the shore might as well have been beyond their powers of vision.

The Missouri River is proverbially the meanest, most deceitful, erratic and treacherous stream in any part of the civilized globe. And those who know it best are apt to believe they know it least.

Its bottoms, also, are known far and wide as among the most fertile and productive farming lands in the great West; but after promising to speedily enrich their owners, they have only too often ended in ruining both him and his brightest hopes, thanks to that yellow flood of mountain-born waters.

These bottoms have, in places, soil that measures yards in depth before the subsoil is reached. It only needs to be "tickled with a hoe to laugh with a harvest." But that very richness, consisting of sand in combination with river silt and layers of decayed leaf-mold, offers but slight resistance to the high floods, and many a poor fellow has seen farm, house, outbuildings and all swallowed up in less than a single day! And then tried to console himself that his life had been spared.

The worst washing occurs when the river is falling, after a high stage, undermining the banks and biting out huge slices at a mouthful. And owing to this, the banks, instead of having a margin, or even a slope, are shelving and overhanging as they rise.

This was why Dan Dunn and Berry Barfort made no attempt to reach land, after their senses had returned sufficiently for them to begin considering ways and means. They both knew that the water ran deep at the base of that treacherous bank. They knew that the current, rushing along that base, forced by the wide bend the river made at this point, would sweep them from a footing even should they succeed in winning one for an instant. Or, if footing was perchance secured, they knew that any attempt to draw themselves up that overhanging bank would result in bringing an avalanche of earth down upon them, to crush to death beneath its weight, or be buried so deeply under the slide that suffocation would be their portion long before the swirling waters could melt away the burden of sand and leaf-mold.

"This is horrible!" gasped Barfort, with a despairing groan.

"But it might have been worse," quickly interposed the detective, with a glance up the river toward the spot where their chase had come to such an unexpected end. "We might be pinned down to the bottom, like poor Brown Bess and the wagon!"

Barfort made no reply. He was not thinking of his own danger. His thoughts were all of Rena Coventry and her fate. It was horrible to be cut off from further efforts toward her rescue—from the awful fate she had apparently chosen for herself.

"Robert is on the scent, pardner," said Dan Dunn, reading aright that look of mental agony and trying to give what consolation lay in his power. "And he'll stick to it like a born bloodhound until the game takes to earth! We'll get there yet, and I just know it!"

There was an echo of triumph in his tones, born of a discovery which he made at that instant.

A couple of hundred yards below them, lighted up by the declining moon, he noted an obstruction to the mad current and speedily recognized the truth; a tree had been undermined, falling into the river, but with its roots still holding fast in the earth, its trunk sloping up the bank, offering a fair chance for them to escape from the water.

"If it don't give way with us!" gloomily muttered Barfort.

The poor fellow must not be blamed too seriously. Remember all that he had been called on to undergo during the past few days!

Dan Dunn spoke a few brief sentences of encouragement; there was time for no more, since their float was too far out, thanks to a swirl and miniature "suck" a short distance above, which had veered it several yards further from shore, and the men would have to abandon it and swim in to catch upon the tree, top or trunk, or roots, as might be.

With one hand gripping his friend by the collar, Dan Dunn pushed off from the float in time to cover the distance without any great expenditure of strength or breath, for he was still distrustful of Barfort's powers, not of body, but of brain.

Fate favored them even more completely than he had dared hope, for his feet struck comparatively solid bottom by the side of the fallen trunk, and he drew Barfort up to a secure position the first thing. And with this off his mind, it did not take him long to see a way out of the tangle of roots.

He pointed this out to Barfort, and sending him on in advance, in readiness to save him in case of a slip or a breaking root, ten minutes later found them on dry land, breathless, but sound in limb.

And none too soon, as events speedily proved. For hardly had he recovered his breath, when Dan Dunn heard voices approaching, and caught sight of a number of men on foot and bearing weapons, coming down the bank of the river, plainly in close search of—whom?

Picking Barfort up in his arms, he vanished under the trees.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON A DANGEROUS SCENT.

REGARDLESS of the fact that the slightest slip or miscalculation on his part would surely cast him down to be slowly ground to death between iron and steel, Robert Turnbull crossed the still moving barrier and alighted safely on his nimble feet just in time to avoid a fall into the ditch at the side of the road.

He avoided this, however, and his first glance ahead showed him the rapidly retreating carriage in which was the game they had chased so long and closely. Brief as had been the delay, the fugitives had improved their chance so well that already the phaeton was at the further end of the lane, and believing himself in little danger of being recognized should Horace Haylock glance back, Turnbull darted after the carriage with the lightness and pace of a professional sprinter.

"It's got to be greyhound, not slow-tracking!" flashed through his busy brain, as though to excuse this seemingly suicidal burst of speed at the very beginning of what promised to be a long and trying chase. "At least as far as the forks in the road!"

The human shadow cast frequent glances ahead at his dangerous game, though for the most part he used his eyes in guarding against trip or stumble over lumps of dried "gumbo," or even more disastrous "chuck-holes," cut deeply during wet weather by the wheels of loaded wagons bringing wood or produce into town.

On one of these occasions Turnbull saw a tall figure standing up above the rest of the dimly-outlined equipage, apparently gazing back to see if the enemy had as yet succeeded in passing the Death-Trap. He instinctively stooped lower, to lessen the risk of being espied, and his purpose if not his identity divined, but he did not break off in his hot chase, just yet.

Not far ahead of where the phaeton could now be seen, there was offered a choice of roads. One could turn to the left and find comparatively smooth traveling as far as the lake itself, on the pleasant shore of which were built the various hotels dependent on the transient custom of fishing, hunting and picnicking parties. Or, by striking deeper into the heavily-timbered bottom to the right, any one of half-a-dozen rude roads gradually crawled snake-like under the shadows, some ending in tangled recesses where cordwood was ranked in skirmishing order, but the rest generally meeting together as the upper end of Lake Contrary was neared.

It was more than likely that the party under command of Horace Haylock would choose the road leading to the lake proper, both because it offered the least impediment to rapid travel, and from the fact that if necessary he could keep right on in a fair road which, by striking the base of the ridge below King's Hill, would bring them back to town without having to double on their own trail until after the Death-Trap was left behind them.

"But I'm taking no chances, you want to understand," reflected the human bloodhound.

Yet no man knew better than he what long chances he was then and there accepting, though in a different sense. He knew that if the tall athlete whom they had tracked all the way from New Ulm Gardens was indeed the personage whom Dan Dunn firmly believed when he made that daring attempt to arrest him in the very midst of his evil gang, that bloodshed was hard-

ly a thing from which he would recoil if it seemed essential to his own safety.

"He'll down me too quick—if he's smart enough!"

A fleeting smile crept across his close-cropped, terrier-like face at this thought, but Robert Turnbull never slackened his machine-like running. If Horace Haylock had indeed discovered his pursuit, at least an effort would be made to dispose of him by surer means than running away, but he must risk that rather than losing the scent.

The carriage with its freight had passed out of sight, but Turnbull never altered his pace for that. He knew that his peril did not lie at or near that point, but further along where better cover offered. And running swiftly as ever he came to the point where the hungry river was feeding on the helpless shore.

Even as he ran, his keen eyes noted a narrow crack lying along the recently-shifted fence, and he slackened his pace sufficiently to mark it curving in an irregular semi-circle, each end drawing closer to the edge. He knew that it was only a question of time when that huge mouthful would be claimed by the sullen waters, and a thought of the peril which his chief might rush blindly into actually brought him to a full stop; but only for an instant.

"Business!" he muttered, springing forward along the fresh wheel-tracks in the sand close beside the fence. "Dunn knows enough of this river to keep his eyes open, I reckon!"

That spurt carried him around the turn, and his keen sight showed him the phaeton just at the edge of the timber. It showed him still more, thanks to the bright moonlight. Horace Haylock was once more standing up in the carriage, looking back as though to ascertain if chase was being made.

It was only a glimpse, but that was sufficient to put Turnbull on his guard. For, despite the difference in size, he knew that with his own shape standing out clear against the river and sky beyond, it was not to be hoped that he had escaped detection.

A brave man's brains work swiftly when an emergency arises, and swiftly as Robert Turnbull was racing he had not covered ten more rods before his plans were roughly marked out.

"It'll lose time if they do turn off toward the head of the lake instead of keeping on to Dunford's, but what of it?" he reflected, with a grim smile, as he left the road and swung himself across the "snake" fence into a field of growing corn. "On such roads I can run two feet to their one and still keep my eyes open!"

As is the case with all such fences, built of rough rails, in zig-zag fashion to avoid the necessity of spikes or posts save the regulation "stake and double riders," weeds, both old and new, elderberry-bushes, pawpaw sprouts, briars, all tangled together and laced with wild grape, hop and cucumber vines, formed a tolerable screen the year round along the fence, for plowing was impossible in the many angles.

Shielded by this, as the corn was far too low to afford perfect cover, the human bloodhound raced until past the point where, if at all, he felt confident an ambush would be laid for him. And at the same time he was able to cut off much ground, thus gaining on the chase without subjecting himself to actual danger.

Turnbull crouched lower behind his thick shield as he caught the sound of hoofstrokes, ringing out sharply on the hard road of dry clay.

A moment later the phaeton came into view, and his teeth showed grimly as he saw that it contained but two persons, instead of three.

Horace Haylock was driving the foam-flecked span, and the woman in navy-blue was alone on the back seat. The driver had disappeared.

From his covert Turnbull strained his eyes eagerly, but the slouched hat of the driver concealed his features, and he could not say whether he wore a mask or not. But he caught a fair glimpse of the woman's face, and at once recognized her as Rena Coventry.

"A face to drive a man mad for love!" he grimly muttered, as he straightened up to mark his best course. "If he didn't know what lay behind that beautiful mask of yours, Harlequin Hat!"

Horace Haylock was driving at goodly speed, but not pressing his team as he had while the emergency seemed greater. There were no signs of the single rig in chase, and his driver could be depended upon to dispose of the footman, if, indeed, he was really in chase, which was at the best more than doubtful.

Robert Turnbull believed that this was about the substance of his big game's reasonings, but still there was no use in running more risk than was absolutely necessary. The road to Dunford's was now perfectly straight, and the lights before the building were already in sight. The road ran between cultivated fields, without tree or bush to shade the level stretch, and he could not take that road without risking detection at the first backward glance.

It was difficult traveling in the edge of the soft, plowed ground, but the distance was not very great, and he felt fairly confident that he would be granted a breathing-spell when the lake was reached. It was hardly likely that

Haylock would press on without pausing, either for his driver to report or some signal which would warn him of more dangerous pursuit than that single footman could threaten.

So, keeping well under cover, though at times he had to bend almost double as open spaces offered themselves along the fence, Turnbull managed to keep from losing very much ground, slackening his killing efforts as soon as he saw the carriage draw up in front of the two-story frame building known as "Dunford's," or the "Lake House."

"Thanks, Haylock, for not keeping right on to the Club House or to Pettipier's!" panted Turnbull, pressing a hand to his side to relieve "a stitch" born of his extraordinary exertions.

By the lights burning on the covered gallery running along the front of the building, he saw Haylock leap out of the carriage, after tossing the lines back to the woman, and hurry past the house itself in the direction of the lake, only a few yards away.

Turnbull was on ground slightly higher than the level occupied by the Lake House, and owing to this, he had a fair view of what followed, even without advancing nearer the scene.

He saw half a dozen men quickly surround the carriage, apparently acting as a friendly guard, for Rena Coventry showed no signs of alarm, nor did Horace Haylock cast a look backward, though he must have brushed elbows with more than one of the fellows.

He saw Haylock advance to the shore end of the long, narrow pier, by which a platform, surrounded by gay, painted boats, could be reached, that shore of the lake being too shallow for even a skiff to be launched from dry land. At each corner of this platform burned a big lantern with red slides to distinguish the landing from those of the other hotels further down the lake. And by the light thus afforded, Turnbull distinguished a boat just reaching the pier, out of which a stout figure leaped to meet Haylock.

"Doctor Craig Dairmid, or I've gone blind!" ejaculated Turnbull, in a burst of amazement as that shape came under the combined lights of the colored lanterns.

There could be no mistake on this point. That figure was too strongly individual for an error, particularly in one so sure-sighted as Dan Dunn's right-hand man. And Turnbull, his eyes glowing with a reddish light under the shade of his slouched hat, crept rapidly but silently nearer the spot where the carriage still stood surrounded by those rough, tough-looking fellows.

All about the Lake House, save for an occasional tree, was cleared away, and the fence behind which Turnbull alone could hope to keep covered from observation, made an abrupt angle several rods from the house. Nearer than this he could not advance without betraying himself to open inspection, and so he crouched down in the corner, making his keen eyes serve for both sight and hearing as far as possible.

He saw that Rena Coventry had covered her face from inspection by means of her light, fleecy scarf, serving very well for a veil in the uncertain moonlight.

He saw Horace Haylock and Dr. Dairmid rapidly approaching, followed more leisurely by two other men, rough-clad, having the appearance of beatmen or lake dwellers.

He saw Dairmid lean into the carriage to speak to the woman, but failed to catch even a word, strain his ears as he would.

Then Dr. Dairmid drew back, swinging his right hand as if in a signal, which was promptly obeyed; for as he moved rapidly away, taking the road over which Haylock and Rena Coventry had recently come, nearly a dozen men followed his lead, all armed with some sort of weapon!

Haylock sprang into the phaeton, taking the lines and driving rapidly away in the opposite direction, or down the lake-shore.

"Which?" muttered Turnbull, his face showing pale and hard as he rose from his covert. "Back to help the boss, or—orders are orders, and I've got mine!"

Once more he was off on the trail of Horace Haylock!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NIGHT HAWKS HUNTING THEIR PREY.

As he made the signal which Turnbull noted, Dr. Craig Dairmid uttered certain words which were intended to mask their actual mission, and to throw the worthy Dunford and his family into error.

"You hear, men?" he uttered, in his deep, sonorous tones. "This isn't the first time a gang of footpads have given trouble along the lake road. Follow me, and we'll make sure it is the last."

That was all, but it was sufficient for his purpose. Added to the excited and exciting tale of attempted robbery, if not murder, told by Horace Haylock, it would suffice to cover any deed of blood which might transpire that night!

After the first few rods were covered, Doctor Dairmid checked his followers in order to assure himself whether they were all part of the Night Hawks, and to be thoroughly trusted. A very

few moments sufficed for this, and then he sharply gave his orders:

"You will wait for my word before making any more bids. If I see the right quality of game, I'll give ample warning for you to make sure your cartridges are not thrown away. And when I do bid you open, keep it up until the devil himself couldn't live through the hail-storm!"

"You bet we will, boss!" grimly uttered one of the number, bearing a repeating Winchester under his right arm. "I've had a taste of that same devil down beyant, me own self, sure!"

Doctor Dairmid led the way until drawing near to the neck of timber under cover of which Horace Haylock had left his driver to cut off the shadowy figure of which he had twice caught a glimpse since crossing the Death-Trap. And as a human shape suddenly stepped from the shade into the moonlight, there was a sudden rattle of weapons as it was covered by the eager Night Hawks.

"Hold, ye devils!" angrily grated the doctor, instantly recognizing the signal which that figure was making with uplifted hands. "It's the man the chief told about: his driver!"

He sprang clear of the gang, responding to the signal, then hurrying forward to receive the report.

"Never a glimpse of man or beast, boss!" was the rapid explanation as the two men met. "Reckon it was all a mistake on the chief's part. Anyway, a rat couldn't have slipped past me without—see?" as he significantly tapped the bulging shape of a heavy revolver in his side pocket.

"And nothing of that infernal detective? No signs of him, yet?" a ked Dairmid, with a dark frown of mingled hatred and perplexity.

"Neither hide nor hair, sir," with a low laugh as of a pleasing memory. "Reckon we stirred up a bucketful of mad when we dodged that engineer, and he's slopping it all over Dan Dunn and company, just to even up matters! Shouldn't wonder if he holds him out of the Trap the rest of the night, or just opens it enough to tempt him into a bit of high and lofty tumbling, with death or broken bones for a mattress to 'light on!'"

"I'd like to be there to witness it—and hold the first examination over the remains!" grimly laughed Dairmid, singling out two of his men, both armed with rifles, and adding: "Each take a side of the road and keep about fifty yards in advance. Watch for footmen as well as a light wagon. That devil may have crossed alone, rather than be balked after so long a chase! If you sight any person, halt them and hold them covered until I come up."

In this order the little stretch of woods was passed through without making any discovery. Nor was aught to be seen of their longed-for prey when the ground lay clear and open before them. As far as the turn in the road a rabbit could not have stirred unseen by some of those eager eyes, thanks to the clear moonlight.

"Maybe—By the Lord! I begin to believe that's the solution!" suddenly cried the driver, his eyes aglow with an evil light as he hurriedly told how, in passing the narrowest neck of land at the river's curve, his horses had almost balked before the stinging lash sent them plunging forward. "I more'n half-expected to go down with a big slide, and if they have made the crossing, that's what's stopped 'em!"

"Ef so, they're heap ways below this!" grimly laughed one of the party, whom his mates called Bill Flick. "Bait fer cats—that's what!"

Hardly knowing whether to hope for this situation or not, Dairmid hurried on with his men at his heels, vainly looking for their hated and feared enemy. Until—

"I knew it!" cried the driver, pointing to where the fence was broken for several yards, the earth gone where the latest road had been less than an hour before. "That's the very spot where my team balked!"

With excited cries the gang surged forward, though slackening pace as they neared the still dangerous spot. Dairmid leaped lightly over the fence to make a closer examination, and his strong face grew still harder as he distinctly made out several gashes in the crumbling bank which had unmistakably been made by the hoofs of a horse pawing madly in the vain attempt to keep from going down to death with the slide.

Even this did not satisfy him, though not another man present but was firmly convinced that the life-trail of the feared detective had broken short off right where they had their eager gaze riveted. He crossed the fence above the break and bent low over the damp sand of which this portion of the road was composed.

"You see, boss!" muttered the driver, gaining his side and pointing out with a finger the signs which his keen eyes could read. "There are my wheel-tracks: these are my horse's, only partly blotted out by the sand scattered over them by Brown Bess. Look at her tracks! Full trot, and with a stride big enough for double her size! Look at the narrow wheel-tracks! And there they end."

There could be no further doubt, and Dr. Dairmid drew a long breath of relief as he ad-

mitted as much. Yet—with a sudden fear—was it not within the bounds of possibility that at least Dan Dunn had escaped with his life? Might he not have fallen clear of the rig, to reach safety by swimming?

He recalled one instance of a similar escape the year before. If one man could escape with life, why not another? And that other the Soft-Hand Sport, whom many men firmly believed to carry a charmed life.

"It's all right, ef you say it, boss, gruffly muttered Bill Flick. "We'll do the huntin', but all the same it's durned foolishness to even think sech a redicklus idee! The ole Mizzoury don't let up on her grip so easy as them—no she don't!"

"No more'n you kin let up your grum'lin'," growled his brother Tom, as the party immediately hurried down the river-bank, keeping as near the edge as was consistent with safety, searching for any signs which might show their game had indeed escaped the hungry flood.

The searchers, for the most part men who lived at or near the lake, and who were perfectly familiar with the workings of that treacherous stream, made no useless pause where scaling the crumbling bank was an impossibility. A passing glance was enough to give all such places, and for the most part their gaze was directed to the water itself, where, at each snag or sawyer, they looked for the drowned mare or wagon, though the chances were against any such lodgment while the current ran so swiftly.

"They ain't no show this side o' the timber," declared Tom Flick, positively. "An only thar ef a tree or sech hes latched in a slide or—Be durned ef thar hain't one now!" his voice rising in the excitement roused by the discovery.

No need of his pointing hand, for the eyes of all that gang were now upon the object—a half-dead tree, with top buried in the muddy current but with its butt still attached to the shore, thanks to its vast mass of snake-like roots.

"Right thar we'll hit some signs, or we never won't this side o' judgment day!" cried Flick, darting down the bank, rushing to his doom.

Pell-mell the others followed, but the brush and roots and stumps bothered them more than the agile "lake bottomer," and he was several rods in advance of the remainder of the party when he paused to peer down the treacherous bank, one hand grasping a slender sapling to keep from toppling downward.

Almost instantly a wild yell parted his lips as his keen eyes detected "sign" for truth! A ray of moonlight was glistening across a slender yellow thread that, among the roots, looked like a golden snake!

Sliding his hand along the sapling as his weight bent it over, the reckless fellow dropped down upon the mass of roots to steady himself as he let the bush fly back. Then he bent and untangled a heavy chain of what looked like gold—torn from Dan Dunn's neck as he helped Berry Barfort up the bank.

"Hyar's yer sign, boss!" he cried, with a laugh that was abruptly cut short by the earth crumbling down upon his head.

And then the tree tore loose from the bank, plunging Flick into the water, strangling his wild shriek of horror as it rolled over and swept him under the muddy surface with its snaky roots!

And as his mates glared in stupefied horror, the mass went floating down the river. But nothing could be seen of poor Tom Flick.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DR. DAIRMID LOSES ONE RECRUIT.

It was instinct rather than reason that led Dan Dunn to catch up his almost helpless friend and hasten with him in his arms away from the bank of the river where they had so narrowly escaped death. But before he had fairly secured snug cover, he saw that his instantaneous acting on that impulse had almost surely prolonged if it had not actually saved their lives.

For as he cast a keen glance over his free shoulder, he recognized the face and figure of Craig Dairmid.

That sight gave him a fair idea of the truth, and fearing for his shaken friend more than for himself, the detective cautiously pressed on through the dense shade, seeking a secure hiding-place for Barfort.

His progress was slow, both because the enemy were drawing rapidly nearer, and the rank undergrowth far from easy to penetrate in silence.

In the darkness his knee struck against a rotten, moss-covered log in the midst of a dense patch of pawpaw bushes, and a backward glance showed him that they were completely hidden from view of the party under Dr. Dairmid.

He stopped short, lowering Barfort with his feet to the ground, one arm supporting him, his other hand ready to instantly close over his lips to smother any incautious ejaculation if made. Then he hurriedly whispered:

"There was no time to spare for argument, pardner. I reckon our game has turned back a pack of curs to throw us off the scent for good; but we'll fool them all, even yet!"

"Save her—don't let her drift to wreck on—"

"You play your part and I'll play mine,

Barfort. Between us I reckon we'll save the lady, if she'll permit us. Now—you want to hug this log mighty close and still for a bit, while I see what I can learn from our friends out yonder. Don't move from here, for if they should hit on our tracks, where we left the drink, we may have to make a running fight for it, and I couldn't afford to lose time hunting you up."

Dan Dunn thought best not to mention Dr. Craig Dairmid. Though Berry Barfort was so weak and worn, any such allusion might cause him to break out after a fashion which, to say the least, would be imprudent.

Viewed from that standpoint, it was rather fortunate that the young man was so worn out, in mind even more than in body. He made no objections to the part assigned him. He asked no questions, but sunk down beside the mossy log, obedient as a sleepy child.

Under less pressing circumstances Dan Dunn might have hesitated about leaving him in such a condition, but just at that juncture the yell of discovery given by luckless Tom Flick, as his keen gaze detected the metal chain tangled up in the roots of the undermined tree by means of which the two friends had escaped the hungry flood, rung with startling clearness through the night, and he felt the stern necessity of learning its full purport, in self-defense.

With the instinct of a true scout, Dan Dunn marked the location of the mossy log so accurately that he could, in case of need, reach it without the aid of eyesight, then crept swiftly through the tangled brush toward the river-bank, all the more easily because of the loud cries and wild excitement which appeared to reign supreme among the pack of Night Hawks.

"Hian's off, cuss ye all!" hoarsely cried Bill Flick, amid the crashing of brush and trampling of heavy feet. "It's my brother—it's my own twin brother—an' I'll save him or v'e'll go down in a heap!"

Dan Dunn came to a point from whence he could witness what followed, and he caught his breath sharply as the full truth flashed upon him.

He saw the lake-bottomer break away from those of his friends who seemed bent on checking his suicidal impulse, then rush to the edge of the river and plunge headlong into the swiftly hurrying flood. And as a few hasty steps carried him to the bank, with the Night Hawks all below him, Dan Dunn recognized the tree by which he and Berry Barfort had escaped the river, floating down-stream, and the black head of a man rapidly overhauling it!

On shore, having to almost run in order to keep pace with the drifting tree, were the Night Hawks and Doctor Dairmid, far too excited for thinking aught of spies, and shrewdly guessing as much, Dan Dunn hastened after them, seeking to solve the mystery.

"If it's anything of our rig, I want to know it!" he muttered below his breath in explanation. "Maybe the wagon was uncovered by the water and lodged, after we got out!"

Half-crazed by grief, Bill Flick reached the floating mass and unhesitatingly dove beneath the surface, groping around that snake-like tangle of roots in search of his twin brother, never giving a thought to his own peril, though more than once a current-twisted root lapped ominously about his body, threatening to hold him beneath the surface until death claimed him, as its fellows had in the case of Tom Flick.

Twice the frantic brother was forced to rise for breath, but only to sink again and again the instant he could replenish his lungs. As he had sworn, he would tear his twin from those horrible roots, or he would join him in death!

Then the long limbs of the floating tree struck some obstacle under the surface, causing the whole drift to quiver and slowly roll over, its mass of roots sweeping the shore as its trunk swung around in the current. And as the mass revolved, the body of the luckless man was released from the death-trap, flung almost into the arms of his brother!

Bill Flick instantly caught the body—dead, as he knew by instinct! And with a desperato effort he drew it with him upon a soft mass of earth which had fallen from the higher bank, and had not yet been dissolved by the swirling flood.

"Bend a saplin' or fetch a len'th o' grape!" he panted, hoarsely, even in that emergency cooler than his partners on the dry land.

The hint once given, compliance was prompt enough, especially on the part of those who lived in the tangled bottoms. They were used to every imaginable make-shift, and the words had scarcely passed the lips of the endangered man before strong arms were tearing down a long grapevine from its hold upon a slender white elm-tree.

A few swift slashes with a knife secured the requisite material and nimble fingers twisted stout loops in the ends while hurrying back to the river-bank. And, thanks to this celerity, both brothers were saved from being swept away by the current which had already licked up almost their entire resting-place.

Bill Flick secured the grapevine about the body of his brother, and the drowned man was quickly drawn up to the level, while the other end of the same vine enabled Bill to resist the

water which was tugging at his own legs. And in another score of seconds he was swiftly drawn up out of danger.

Not a word of thanks did he utter. He sunk on his knees by the side of his twin, silently feeling of his heart, his pulse, bending his ear to his livid lips. He knew that it was too late to do aught more, and almost savagely pushed Dr. Dairmid back as the physician would have examined the corpse.

"Back—han's off, durn ye, Doc!" he grated, his eyes glowing like those of a dangerously-angered wild beast through the gloom which overhung the grim scene. "Don't ye dar' to tech him! Don't ye, Doc! Fer ef it hedn't 'a' bin for you an' the likes o' ye pore Tom wouldn't be layin' hyar, dead an' gone—*whar?* To hell, whar you'd ort to be fillin' his shoes this minnit!"

Despite his iron nerves, Dr. Dairmid shrunk visibly from that fierce outburst, but his tones were cold and even when he uttered:

"You are crazed, Flick. Did I bid your brother act so rashly?"

"You bought his soul with your money, Doc," retorted Flick, rising to his feet, his voice ominously low and even, his face looking as pale as that of the corpse lying at his feet. "You tempted him to his death. You made him fer-git his own mother that begged him to stay white an' honest an' true to the right—begged it as she lay on what we all reckoned was her death-bed, Doc. An' pore Tom he swore it should be so. He was her favoryte; though we was twin-brothers. An' mother tuck what he said for truth. An' she don't know no better this black night, Doc, 'long o' your money. Mebbe this very minnit she's prayin' to her God that Tom'll keep straight, an'—"

Strong emotion choked his speech, and with the instinctive dread which all of his class seem to feel of ridicule for a weakness, the bereaved twin turned abruptly away, hiding his face in the gloom.

Without a word of reply Dr. Dairmid knelt beside the drowned man and made a quick but thorough examination. He knew beforehand that it was labor spent in vain, for no mortal could live so long under water, even if those cruel roots and rolling mass had held without bodily injuring their victim. But he knew that some of his men would feel he had neglected a duty without he did so much.

His silence as he gave over and rose to his feet was answer sufficient for those eager, troubled looks, and even Bill Flick did not see fit to ask a question, though his burning gaze was riveted upon the dark face of the physician as he drew his form erect.

"He's dead, Doc. I knowed he was dead the minnit I tetcht him in the water. We was twins, ye know, an' they's a heap in that. I knowed it was only a shell that I was totin' back to dry land. A shell that I've got to lie over miles deep, Doc, or else kill the mother that fetched pore Tom into this world; an' her makin' pore Tom alays her favoryte o' the hull kit o' young-uns!"

"It's hard, Flick, but—"

"An' who done it all, Doc?" with fierce passion bursting through the thin crust of enforced composure. "Who but you an' them that's rowin' in the same boat? Who but—may God—ef they is a God!—rain his blackest cusses down on your head an' the heads o' them that train with you, Doc! May the hull kit an' b'il-in' o' ye die a dog's death like that your cussed money fetched pore Tom into! May everythin' go wrong with your plans an' your plottin's on—"

"Steady, Flick!" harshly cried Doctor Dairmid, a hand on his revolver as he sternly confronted the half-crazed brother. "Remember who and what you are cursing, my fine fellow!"

"You an' the hull gang, Doc!" with sullen ferocity, though he visibly shrunk back from that commanding figure. "Ef it wasn't fer that, pore Tom wouldn't be a dead body this night! You led him like a dog with a chain 'bout his neck, through his love o' your money—led him to his death! But you can't lead me the same road no longer! From this time on I've got nothin' to do with the gang, an' ef—"

He stopped short as Doctor Dairmid covered him with a revolver.

"You mean you'll sell us out, Bill Flick?"

"I mean that I'm done with the hull business, Doc," sullenly.

There was an ominous muttering among the majority of the gang of Night Hawks, and they closed about the trio: the doctor, the dead and the living twin.

"Is that all you mean, Flick?" coldly demanded the leader. "In throwing off your allegiance to the family, have you any thoughts of selling out their secrets? Don't answer in too great a hurry, Flick. It may be even more serious than you fancy, at first glance!"

He must have been a dullard indeed who could fail to read aright the menace which underlay this cold, even warning. And deep though his grief undoubtedly was, Bill Flick had reason enough left to comprehend the peril by which he was surrounded.

"Look at pore Tom, Doc," his voice shaking with the emotions which he could not entirely

crush down, desperately as he tried. "Dead—drowned like a dog with a stun' tied 'round his neck fer aig-suckin' or sheep-killin'—an' him his pore ole mother's favoryte! Look what j'inin' the Night Hawks hes fetched him to! All fer a few dirty dollars more'n he could hope to make by honest fishin' an' seinein'!"

"And you, Bill Flick?" persisted Doctor Dairmid, coldly.

"I won't blow, nur nothin' like that, but ef it kills me, Doc, I'll stick to what I said fu'st-off," sullenly. "I'm quits with the gang from this night on! Now—make the wu'st on it!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BERRY BARFORD BREAKS DOWN.

CROUCHING down in the midst of a dense clump of pawpaw bushes, Dan Dunn heard all of this, and by cautiously separating the huge drooping leaves, he saw a goodly portion of what occurred as well.

He particularly noted the face and figure of Bill Flick, until, as he silently crawled away until beyond earshot, he muttered to himself:

"I'll know you among ten thousand, William! And if the doctor don't prescribe a dose for you much of a muchness with the one he kindly put up for my benefit, free of charge, maybe I'll look you up before long!"

Only for his anxiety concerning Berry Barford, the detective would have lingered long enough to see how matters ended with the half-crazed twin; but under the circumstances he deemed it best to beat a retreat with his friend while the coast was clear.

"I'd give a finger just to have him safe up-town!" with a frown and a sparkle of fire in his eyes as he hurried back to the mossy log where he had left the young man. "Alone, I'd nip Dairmid this very night, and find out how he comes so far away from his honorable patient!"

Dan Dunn had no difficulty in reaching the log, thanks to the precautions he had taken before hastening after the excited gang of Night Hawks. He found Berry Barford, just as he left him, save that he had fallen into a half-sleep, half-stupor, worn out in brain even more than in body.

Though he himself had not passed through so much without feeling the effect of his exertions, Dan Dunn was still fresh and strong. And without risking an arousing then and there, he lifted Barford to his broad shoulders, hurrying away from that spot, still dangerous, owing to the proximity of the evil gang.

Not until the edge of the timber was reached did Dan Dunn pause for either rest or explanations, though his rapid motion through the switching brush and low hanging limbs had pretty thoroughly awakened his friend. But now, helping Barford across the fence into the field, he followed after and hastily uttered:

"No time now to tell you what I discovered, pardner, but it was no bad news. I reckon the gang will decide that we are both of us bait for the fishes, but it's just a chance that they may strike out for town by this route. So—until we're really safe, we'll make the best use of what cover is offered. See?"

"And Re—Miss Coventry?" hesitated Barford. "Is doubtless safe and snug in her own chamber before this," the detective had no scruples about saying. "They sent this gang from the lake after us, then took the Bluff road to town."

In his present dazed, worn-out condition, Barford accepted the answer without a word of question. Great as was his love—even more passionate now than when the skies were smiling—for Rena Coventry, he was too nearly broken down to go against a strong mind like that of the friendly detective.

Keeping inside the field, fairly well covered by the fence and its fringe of wild growth, Dan Dunn made as much speed as possible, under the circumstances. He kept an arm around the unsteady form of his companion, changing sides occasionally, lending him much-needed aid. Only for this the poor fellow would have given out long before the railway-crossing was reached.

Only once were they forced to lose time, thanks to the coming of Dr. Dairmid, in company with three other men on foot, heading for up-town. While they passed Dan Dunn took particular pains to keep Berry Barford from recognizing his hated enemy, fearing an outburst which could only end in killing or death for themselves.

The Death-Trap was passed without delay, the fussy little "pony" having apparently ceased its labors for the night. Or, as Dan Dunn half-angrily suggested, because there were no more passing teams to annoy!

After this, thanks to the change of hotels which the detective had made after their misadventures at the Pacific House, their journey was not greatly prolonged. And as the huge bulk of the World's Hotel began to loom up before his eyes Dan Dunn felt almost like uttering a prayer of thanksgiving.

For the last mile or more he had almost literally carried Berry Barford, and that was no light task, even for his muscular arms and tempered sinews.

He paused for a few minutes outside of the massive structure which has known so many

changes and passed through so many vicissitudes, trying to "brace up" his worn-out friend in order to lessen the risk of having to answer annoying questions. Thanks to the aid his strong arms had lent, this was not impossible, and then, disguising their dilapidated and disreputable appearance as much as possible, they entered the office arm in arm, Barford sinking into a chair while Dan Dunn hurriedly whispered a few words of explanation to the astonished clerk on duty.

As he had come to the house bearing the best of references, among them that of the mayor and the city marshal, then head of the police force, the clerk raised no objections to permitting them both seeking a chamber.

Once inside his room, with the door locked behind them, Dan Dunn drew a long breath of relief as he sunk into a chair.

"Thank the fates for so much!" he said, forcing a smile as he saw how strangely Berry Barford was gazing into his face from the bed. "I have enjoyed some tolerably lively nights in my time, but this rather surrounds the bakery—eh, pardner?"

"But—she isn't in this house?"

"Well, no doubt she's more comfortably lodged and sound asleep hours ago," briskly responded Dunn, though there was a new anxiety coming into his brain as he saw how strangely those sunken orbs glowed.

He expected to see the lover completely broken down, but this was something new. Had he suffered so much that his brain was turned? Did this wild glitter betoken a crazy mind?

"And that reminds me: we're rather late for turning in, but we can call dinner breakfast, don't you see?" rising and bustling about, but covertly making a close study of this unexpected phase. "And as we're both too dog-tired to sleep easily, how would a bit of a night-cap answer? You've sworn off, I know, but circumstances alter cases, and if you really want to help Miss Coventry out of the ugly tangle into which her enemies have led her, you've got to follow my orders. See?"

"I can't sleep—I don't think I'll ever sleep again!" muttered Barford, burying his face in the pillows with a moan of agony bitterer than death at the sound of that loved name.

"I've felt that way time without end, pardner," cheerily laughed Dan Dunn, though there was precious little mirth in his heart just then, as he unlocked a substantial sachel in the little closet, taking from it a flask of brandy and a small vial of colorless liquid.

"What is that?" abruptly demanded Berry Barford, lifting his head, his eyes still filled with that ominous gleam. "Poison?"

"Not a bit of it, pardner," with a start of undisguised astonishment at the idea thus suggested. "Only a patent sleep-persuader of mine. You need a sound snooze, and you're going to catch it, too, if I have to call all the house force to hold your mouth open while I administer the dose!"

There was a kindly roughness in his tones, for he fancied he saw Barford's eyes dimming a bit at his first blunt words, and he knew that dreamless sleep would work wonders in such a case as this.

"Tell me—what do you make of all this horrible mystery?" Berry Barford asked, his tones husky, and yet more natural than before.

"Will you promise, on honor, to take this draught directly after I answer you, pardner?" quickly questioned the detective.

Barford nodded assent, and Dan Dunn briskly responded:

"I think that there is some horrible mistake been made. I think that the woman you saw and thought was Miss Coventry at New Ulm, was an entirely different person. I think I know who she really is, and I give you my word, as a man and a friend, that I'll show her to you for just what she is, before another day comes to an end!"

He quickly dropped out a certain quantity of the drug into a small dose of brandy, then held it out as he said:

"Not another word out of my head this blessed night, pardner! Keep your promise, and drink that off—pleasant dreams be thine!"

Barford gulped the potion down, then painfully uttered:

"Unless all that has happened to night is a foul, cheating lie, I hope and pray that I may never waken to life again!"

Without another word he turned his face to the wall.

Dan Dunn pulled off his wet shoes and socks, but did not venture to ask him to disrobe further. He covered him up snugly, believing that on such a warm night there was little risk of his taking cold.

He turned the gas jet low, seating himself beside the bed, pondering silently over all that had happened since their first encounter.

And when the steady, regular breathing of Barford proclaimed his falling under the influence of the potion, the detective put out the light and lay down on the floor, muttering gloomily to himself:

"Per devil! And there's still worse to come! How will he bear up under still another and a heavier blow?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

EITHER KILL OR CURE.

CONFIDENT that Berry Barfort would not overcome the effects of that sleeping draught for long hours, the Soft-Hand Sport himself quickly dropped off into a restful, profound slumber that lasted for hours after the rising of the sun.

There was nothing so remarkable in this, considering the night was so nearly spent before he had a chance to close his eyes in sleep, and how heavily his physical powers had been taxed since the last setting of the sun. True, it might have profited his case more had he the power of dispensing with rest or sleep altogether, but a man does not cease to be mortal, with all that implies, simply because he wears the glittering badge of a detective.

Hence it was nearly noon before Dan Dunn opened his eyes, gave a yawn that almost dislocated his jaws, fought vigorously against the temptation of another nap, and rose to his feet with an anxious glance toward that silent figure lying on the bed.

What if that grimly-despairing prayer had been answered? What if Barry Barfort should be taken at his word, and never more waken to life in this world?

He lay so still, so death-like, that for an instant the Soft-Hand Sport actually feared to put his doubts to the test, and when he conquered that half-superstitious fear, a soft sigh parted his lips.

"Wouldn't he be better off if death had stolen upon him as he slept?" the detective wondered, noting what sad havoc trials and grief, doubt and mental torture had wrought in that once handsome face. "If plain doubts can alter a man so completely, what will conviction do? Kill him—or drive him to the insane asylum?"

In silence lest his movements arouse the unfortunate lover, Dan Dunn changed his clothes for a more respectable looking suit, taken from the closet, and these fresh garments, with a liberal wash and vigorous "dry shampoo" made him look another man from the muddy, ragged, disreputable, broken-down sport of a few minutes earlier.

With a last glance at Berry Barfort, who was sleeping quietly and dreamlessly, if his outward appearance could be trusted, the detective gently turned the key in its wards and opened his door. To give a little ejaculation of surprise, for the figure of a man partly fell across the threshold as the door swung open!

"Morning, boss!"

"You, Robert?" ejaculated the Soft-Hand Sport in his amazement.

It was indeed the human shadow whom he had last seen shooting between the two cars forming that long freight train at Death-Trap crossing, looking something the worse for wear, but fairly wide awake and ready for whatever duty might offer.

Dan Dunn drew back and Robert Turnbull entered the chamber, taking in the whole interior at a single glance, then facing his superior to tersely deliver his report.

"Followed them, sir, down to Dunford's. There they met Doctor D., sent him with a gang to cover their back track. The chief drove on, by the Bluff road, returning to the house on South Ninth, where they called it a day's work and knocked off. I waited until I felt sure of this, then called in Abel Thompson to act as my substitute while I came down here to see if you had returned. Found you had. Heard you snoring, so took a 'lean' on your door, knowing that it'd wake me up when you unlocked."

"You saw the chief enter that house, to remain?"

Robert Turnbull nodded a prompt assent.

"He only waited to send off the team by the regular coachman. From that I reckoned it was a livery team, or such. Then he joined the young woman, who was waiting for him at the front door. They both entered. I made sure they did not come out, either of them, until I gave Abel his instructions. They were to keep all eyes open, and if a man answering to the shape and size of the chief was to leave the house, Abel was to shadow him wherever he went, dropping word at the station for me."

"Better than I could have done myself!" nodded the detective. "You should have aroused me, instead of trying to rest in such an awkward position, Robert! Not a word; you lie down—the bed is wide enough for two—and crowd all the sleep you can into the time it'll take me to go to the post-office and back again."

Five minutes later the Soft-Hand Sport, looking bright and fully himself again, showing no signs of all he had undergone the night last past, left the hotel and walked briskly along to the car line, just the ghost of a smile flitting across his lips as he detected a shabby-looking fellow plainly dogging his movements.

Although the spy betrayed himself so hastily, it was proof sufficient that the Night Hawks were bent on making the best possible fight. And that they were no mean adversaries he realized when he reflected how careful he had been to cover his change of quarters, and how

little he had been about the hotel since leaving the Pacific.

"Was he set on watch before our little trip of last night?" the detective mused while watching the tactics of the spy, who made no attempt to board the car at the turn-table, the line extending no further in that direction, but cutting rapidly across the wide open space of unimproved property, plainly intending to cut the car off when it made the turn to head up-town, all the time keeping a keen if covert watch to make sure the detective did not abandon the car at the corner. "Or have they found out how we gave the hungry Missouri the slip last night?"

The spy jumped on the car, keeping on the rear platform as he puffed at a huge cigar, apparently the most unconcerned soul in all the city instead of being a tracker on the scent of such a dangerous enemy to him and his. And after marking his shape and figure for possible recognition in a different guise, the Soft-Hand Sport gave himself no further trouble in that direction.

It may not have been forgotten that, after his first glimpse of the photograph which Berry Barfort named as the portrait of Rena Coventry, but which Dan Dunn firmly believed represented a certain personage known in police circles as "Harlequin Hat," or Hattie, the detective hinted at sending a dispatch to Headquarters for further information concerning that individual.

This he had done, shortly after astounding Kid Price by slipping that knife into his hand and bidding him steer clear of losing it again so carelessly. And though a dispatch came promptly in reply, apparently confirming his worst suspicions, Dan Dunn had not as yet received his final proofs. He expected them that morning, and was about to call for the same at the post-office.

He left the car as it swung around the curve at Sixth and Francis, walking the short distance to the Opera House block. He paused at the general delivery, handing in a card on which were written a few words. After a slight delay, a flat package was delivered to him, together with a letter, both directed in the familiar hand of St. Louis's chief of police.

Dunn fell back to one of the desks attached to the wall for the public accommodation, and quickly tore open the package, giving its contents a keen glance before slipping it into an inside pocket. The letter he did not open, turning to see the spy only a few feet from his present position, an eager light in his eyes as though, in his anxiety to glean news, he had been trying to inspect the detective's correspondence at long range!

The Soft-Hand Sport gave no sign until he was almost within arm's-length of the fellow, then he tapped him on the arm, coolly uttering:

"I'm going back to the hotel, pardner. You can save five cents car-fare if you're minded to take my word for it."

Without pausing to hear what the startled rascal might say, Dunn left the building and boarded the first car going his direction. He was the only occupant, at first, and this gave him a chance to hastily glance over the letter which, under advice of the head of the detective agency, the chief of police had written him.

There was a dark frown on the detective's face as he placed the letter with the photograph inside his vest. Though this information bade fair to greatly simplify his own mission to St. Joseph, it would prove a terrible addition to the mental burden which poor Barfort was already staggering under.

"How will it end?" mentally asked the Soft-Hand Sport. "How will the poor fellow bear up under this deciding blow? Will it kill? It's either that or cure!"

Dan Dunn saw nothing more of the spy during his ride back to the hotel, and though he smiled faintly whenever the thought struck him, he really cared little one way or the other. He knew that the really valuable game could not escape him, thanks to the precautions he had taken in advance. A few of the lesser lights might steal away undisturbed, but they counted for little when their leading lights were so surely in the toils.

Nothing of this sort was troubling him just then. His whole mind bent on finding how he could best break the black truth to his sorely-afflicted friend, though that would have been simple enough had Berry Barfort been in anything like a sound condition of body and mind.

"It's risky, but there's no other way," finally decided the detective, as he left the car at the terminus and strode briskly toward the hotel. "He'll have no baby talk after the pledge I gave him. Well, it's just as I said first-off: either kill or cure!"

Gaining the hotel, the Soft-Hand Sport learned that the occupants of his number had not put in an appearance, and he at once sought out the head-waiter, slipping a gold coin into his willing palm, bidding him arrange a good and plentiful meal for three hungry men.

"Overlook it yourself, please, and add to the list a couple of bottles of good wine, such as you can honestly recommend to a friend," added Dunn, with true diplomacy.

Although he felt that there could be little chance for treachery under the circumstances, he decided to run no outside risks, and patiently waited to bear the order company to his room. Now that the Night Hawks were fully aware of his business there in St. Joseph, they would hardly stop at trifles if a chance offered itself by improving which they might throw him off the scent for good and all.

The head-waiter, after noting the value of his tip, laid aside his dignity for the time being, and himself saw to the meals being arranged and the wine procured. And Dan Dunn smiled with the satisfaction of a thoroughly hungry man as he led the way up-stairs to his chamber.

A single rap on the parol sufficed to waken Robert Turnbull, tired though he was from his long and muscle-testing chase of the night before. He opened the door, and the food was quickly arranged on the little round table which stood in the middle of the room.

Dan Dunn generously "tipped" the servants, then closed and locked the door behind them, after which he approached the bed and gently shook the quietly slumbering lover.

That sleep was not lightly broken, though Barfort lifted his head with a far more calm and natural look in his reddened eyes than Dunn had dared to anticipate. But the burden of his trouble was plain enough from his first words:

"You promised—tell me all about—"

"I'll tell you everything, pardner, after you've washed the cobwebs out of your eyes and played your part with Robert and I at this little stop-over-hungry," interrupted Dunn, his tones a mixture of authority and coaxing.

"I can't eat—I can't wait!" groaned the unhappy lover.

"You've got to do both, or find out what you lack without help of ours, Barfort," coldly retorted Dunn, believing that force would serve his ends better than coaxing just then.

And he was right. Weak, broken in spirit as in body, Barfort could not assert himself, and in a few minutes more was looking much the better for a vigorous bath, and actually showing some interest in the appetizing viands which Dan Dunn heaped upon his plate. After the first reluctant bites, his appetite returned, and he ate heartily for the first time since that bitter black trouble had come upon him.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RECORD OF HARLEQUIN HAT.

KNOWING that the blow must fall, Dan Dunn delayed it only until Berry Barfort had eaten his fill, positively declining to taste the wine which was offered him.

"God helping me," he gravely declared, "I'll never touch lips to spirits in any shape or form. Just when I most needed my strength of body and mind I lost both through drink. Don't ask me again, unless you wish me to rank you with my enemies, Dunn."

"I'm glad to hear you talk that way, for at least two reasons. One is that it's manly talk. The other—I'll let it simmer yet a bit longer before offering it for inspection," laughed Dunn, his eyes glowing with satisfaction at this evidence of returning strength, no less of body than of mind.

"Instead, tell me what you promised," urged Barfort.

"You want me to explain what I meant when I told you that the woman you saw at New Ulm was a person entirely different from the lady you gave your love? I'll do it!" quickly, to check the eager questions which rose to the lips of the lover. "On condition that you keep still until I have given you the record, in brief, of that young woman."

"But—I heard her voice! I saw her face!"

"And so I fancied I recognized a face I knew once upon a time," nodded the Soft-Hand Sport, briskly. "You proved my mistake then. Let me see if I can't prove you never really loved that woman we met at the mask ball."

Barfort sunk back into his chair silent but uneasy. Overtaken though his brain had been of late, it was still clear enough to notice that Dan Dunn refrained from distinctly declaring that the woman in the navy-blue garb at New Ulm was not Rena Coventry. Was he simply using craft to soften a heavy blow to be presently dealt? Did he mean that he, Barfort had only loved an ideal which had no substance?

Dan Dunn saw something of this in that haggard, anxious face, but he could take no further precautions. The truth must come out in the end, and Barfort would never be stronger to bear it than right now.

"The face you saw at New Ulm, pardner, was that of a notorious adventuress, known to police-annals as Harlequin Hat or Hattie, more from her marvelous ability to alter her face and figure without seeming disguised or made-up to the sharpest eyes, than from the fact of her having been an actress of the lower grade; playing in burlesque and, I believe, actually taking the part of harlequin on several occasions before she was old enough for her sex to betray itself in that garb. But that part of her record don't count, just now."

"As she grew older Hattie grew worse, from an honest standpoint. She became associated with some of the most dangerous crooks in the

land, and soon developed into a magnificent confidence-woman, though it was a long time before the police dropped to the truth of her doings.

"At that time Hattie went sailing around under the wing of a fine-looking old gentleman supposed to be her father. I say supposed, for no proof to that effect was ever offered the persons who shortly after became most interested in Hattie."

Barfort seemed about to speak, his face paler than ever as he recalled how peculiarly Dunn had questioned him about Knox Coventry after examining that gentleman's photograph. But the detective lifted a finger in warning, and the agitated young man subsided, biding his time.

"The first open exposure of Harlequin Hattie followed a sensational scene which took place at a prominent hotel in Richmond. Never mind just what that scene consisted of. Enough to say that, though Hattie drilled several holes through the anatomy of a gay Southern sport, he flatly refused to prosecute her, or even to admit that her dainty hand worked the knife. But circumstantial proof was strong enough to give the detective a fair excuse for looking up her record, and before the year grew old, Harlequin Hattie had the questionable satisfaction of knowing that copies of her charming face were adorning every regues' gallery in the States.

"I saw one of them in St. Louis, just a few days before I met you, pardner, and it was this wonderful resemblance to the photograph I accidentally saw in your possession, that same night, that led to my believing the woman who sat for them at different times, must be the same individual."

"I will not believe that while the bare ghost of a hope remains!"

"That's wate, pardner," nodded Dunn, emphatically. "Neither would I in your case. But—if it should prove to be so; if I was to find out that I had been shamefully deceived by the woman to whom I had surrendered my heart of hearts; I would smother that false passion if I died while in the act of crushing out the last dying spark! And so would you, pardner, or you're less a man than I take you for!"

Barfort bowed his head on the table, shivering violently. He knew now that there was indeed no hope remaining. He knew, as surely as if the very words had passed the lips of the detective, that this Harlequin Hattie and Rena Coventry were one and the same person!

Dan Dunn maintained silence for a brief space, feeling that it was well to let Barfort struggle with the terrible truth for a little. He drew a long breath of relief himself, for he had not dared hope for a reception like this. Knowing how terribly weakened the lover was by all he had undergone in mind and body, he would hardly have been surprised to see Barfort drop dead in his chair at the revelation.

"All of this happened before I took any special interest in Harlequin Hattie or her record," the detective resumed, his tone quiet and even. "That interest was aroused when another monstrous crime occurred in St. Louis, where I was living in peace with my old father. It was the brutal murder and robbery of an old man, one of the few friends we—father and I—had made. And that will explain why I took up the case, as a detective once more."

"Every bit of evidence pointed to the head members of a widespread organization of criminals known as the Night Hawks. And when this murder was fully investigated, proof pointed very positively toward Harlequin Hat and one Horace Haylock, a prominent member of, if not the actual chief, of the western division of the Night Hawks."

"Never mind the details, just now. It would tire you to hear how each faint thread was gathered up and carefully spun into a strong clew which, as I hope and trust, will in the end drag the red-handed assassins to the halter! Enough that I found a clew which, as I believed from the very first, proved true in all respects. I followed that clew through many other towns, but it finally brought me here to St. Joseph. And though my suspicions led me to shadowing certain persons and certain houses, you gave me my first positive information, though wholly unconscious of that fact."

Barfort shivered anew, but Dan Dunn quietly went on:

"I fancied I recognized the face of Knox Coventry, though the full beard he wore puzzled me to be sure. I knew I recognized the face of the woman you called Miss Coventry, but I gave both her and you the benefit of the faint doubt, and covered my slip as best I could."

"I lost no time in wiring to Headquarters, asking them to send me by registered mail a copy of Harlequin Hat's photograph, and to send me a statement detailing her latest known visit to St. Louis, with such other particulars as I might need to convince you I was right and you were wrong."

"While waiting for these proofs, I disguised myself after a fashion and called on Miss Rena Coventry at her father's residence on South Ninth, yesterday, late in the afternoon. I pretended to be a messenger sent from the chief of

the Night Hawks, to warn his people of danger threatening from one Dan Dunn. And though I knew they must already be aware of my presence and business in town, thanks to Pony Keefe and his keen ears, I forced an interview with the young woman."

"You saw her? You swear it was Rena Coventry?" hoarsely demanded Barfort, lifting his head and gazing fixedly into that handsome face.

"I saw Harlequin Hattie," was the deliberate response. "She was plainly suspicious, and declined to recognize the signs of the family which I gave her, but I made sure there was no mistake before I took my departure. I swear by all man holds holy that the woman who answers to the name of Rena Coventry, is really and truly Harlequin Hat, adventuress and confidence woman, if not an actual murderess!"

As he finished speaking these positive words, Dan Dunn drew from his breast the photograph which he had that day received, placing it in the trembling hand of the sorely-shaken lover.

Barfort gave a shivering groan as he caught sight of that face: so sweetly smiling, so rarely lovely in expression, so perfect in feature. But then—with a sharp, choking cry he dashed a hand across his eyes and turned the card so that the light fell more clearly athwart its polished surface. And not yet daring to trust his eyesight, he rose and rushed to the window, into which the bright sun was shining, to make sure it was no flaw in the paper or the portrait itself. And as he realized the glorious truth, Berry Barfort fell upon his knees, panting:

"I thank Thee, Father! Never again will I doubt Thy perfect justice and mercy!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BURSTING OF A BOMB.

"KILL or cure, I thought, but crazy's got it!" ejaculated the Soft-Hand Sport, as he also hurriedly vacated his seat, making a signal which Robert Turnbull had no difficulty in rightly interpreting.

Knowing as he did that there had been no mistake on his part, Dan Dunn could only explain that strange prayer by the sudden failure of an overtasked brain, and he expected to see Berry Barfort attempt to hurl himself headlong from the open window, or make some other desperate stroke at his own ruined life.

But before either of the two detectives could pass around the obstructing table to close with and overpower him, Berry Barfort rose to his feet, a strange smile upon his face, a glad yet tremulous echo in his voice as he held out the photograph and demanded:

"There is no mistake, Dunn? This is really the picture of the woman you call Harlequin Hattie? In the name of high Heaven I beg of you to tell me the truth—the whole truth!"

Still fearful, though with his doubts a little shaken by that joyous glow, Dan Dunn slipped one strong arm about the young man as he held both hand and photograph with his other fingers. And though he knew there could be no mistake, he first looked, then replied:

"I take my oath that is the picture of Harlequin Hat, taken at St. Louis directly after one of her arrests and convictions."

"Thank a merciful Providence for that!" with fervor, as he shook the card from his fingers much as one might draw away from contact with a venomous serpent. "For I can swear by all that mankind holds sacred! it is not the picture of Miss Rena Coventry!"

"Well, maybe it isn't, pardner," gently responded Dan Dunn, more than ever convinced that grief and despair had overthrown the reason of his young friend. "Anyway, we'll play it that way until—"

Berry Barfort cut him short by a little laugh, turning and laying a hand on each shoulder as he gazed with glowing eyes into those of the Soft-Hand Sport. And then, in slow, even, picked words and tones he uttered:

"You think I am crazy, Mr. Dunn. You believe this shock has finished the work begun by Craig Dairmid; but you are wrong. I am as sane as you or our good friend here. And if you will resume your seat, I'll undertake to prove as much to you."

Without a word Dan Dunn complied, but when the three men were once more seated at the little table, he spoke earnestly enough:

"If you have jumped at a hope, Barfort, because of the difference in expression as shown by this card, remember how Harlequin Hat came to be nicknamed: through her marvelous skill in making up her face and person to represent others, with almost lightning rapidity."

"There is a still more important point to be discussed first," commented Barfort, looking years younger and wonderfully improved in all respects since gazing upon that pictured face. "You still declare this is a truthful representation of Harlequin Hat? You are not mistaken? Be perfectly sure of this, I beg of you, Mr. Dunn!"

The Soft-hand Sport silently turned the picture over, showing a number of lines, words and figures, printed on the white surface. Berry Barfort eagerly caught it up and read, his eyes all aglow, his face slowly flushing, his breath coming quick and short.

It was a terse but comprehensive record of the adventuress known as Harlequin Hattie. It gave a long list of aliases, in addition to her height, weight, dimensions and—a birthmark!

Berry Barfort laughed softly as he came to this, turning to the smiling face itself to confirm the description. It was correct. The position plainly showed the right side of the woman's face. The lower half of her right ear-lobe was missing; one would hardly note this unless having his attention called to the fact, but then there could be no mistake about the mark.

"Then I swear we have bitterly wronged Miss Coventry!" declared Barfort, with difficulty keeping his voice free from powerful emotion, as his forefinger touched the slight disfigurement. "I can make oath that Miss Coventry has no such birthmark as this!"

"To the best of your knowledge and belief, pardner," laughed Dan Dunn, though there was precious little mirth in the sound.

"Without the slightest shadow of reservation, sir!" flashed Barfort, steadily encountering that half-pitying gaze. "If this be the correct representation of the vile woman you declare Harlequin Hat, I swear that it was never taken from the face of Miss Rena Coventry!"

There was a brief silence. Dan Dunn frowned a bit, and would have given a goodly sum could he have accepted that resolute affirmation. But with future events staring him in the face, this was out of the question. Better end the matter at once and for all time.

"It's hard, pardner," he slowly uttered, gently dropping a cool palm on the fevered hand of his friend as it rested on the table between them. "It looks as if I really wanted to trample you back into the mire, just as you begin to believe you have fought your way out of it to dry ground. But—"

"Say what you will, Dunn, I know I am in the right as surely as you are mistaken," confidently smiled Barfort. "Miss Coventry bears no such mark as this picture and record declares identifies Harlequin Hat."

"It is barely a mark, pardner," with the ghost of a smile, but cordially returning that friendly grip. "No one who wasn't looking sharp for something of the sort would ever notice it, on face or card."

"You forget, Dan," his face irradiated with perfect faith once more, "I love her. She is my promised bride!"

Every moment was but making the stern duty harder for a friend to perform, and Dan Dunn at once plunged in over head and ears.

"You know how I was startled by that photograph of yours. You have been told why, and what were my first steps to make sure there was no mistake on my part. But now—listen, pardner; though I'd give a good finger if another pair of lips had to tell the story!"

"I told you how I paid a visit to the house on South Ninth. I told you how I managed to secure an interview with Miss Rena Coventry, and I said that before she ended that interview I made sure of my object in risking the trip."

"I swear that the woman I saw in the house claimed as his residence by the person known in St. Joseph as Knox Coventry, was Harlequin Hat! I declare that the woman you heard speak at New Ulm Gardens; the woman from whose face you snatched the mask; the woman we chased down through town to Death-Trap crossing; the woman whom Robert, here, followed from the crossing to the lake, from the lake around by the Bluff road to the house on South Ninth, is the very person from whose face this picture was taken by order of the police."

The color slowly died out of Barfort's face at this comprehensive statement, but though a new fear came into his voice, it was not based on his old hideous doubts.

"There is some horrible trickery in it all, then!" he declared. "I know that Rena Coventry has no such mark, through accident or born with her. Her right ear, as her left, is perfect in shape. Then—knowing this as firmly as I do—who is taking her place? What has—"

His voice choked. He could not pronounce the hideous fear which was springing up to fill the place so long claimed by those haunting doubts. But so genuine was his emotion that, despite himself, Dan Dunn was powerfully impressed.

He knew that he had made no error himself. He knew that the woman who responded when he called to the name of Miss Coventry, was marked by a peculiar fold in her right ear-lobe: as if the lower edge had been pushed up inside the lobe itself, leaving a slight crease, thickening the upper half of the lobe, giving it the appearance of having been severed, the lower section removed entirely. A slight disfigurement, but one which could not be mistaken by keen eyes on the watch for just such a clew.

Yet—was it impossible that, after all, Berry Barfort had made still another mistake? Was it out of the question that a woman as bold and skillful at "making up" as Harlequin Hattie could remove the real heiress to take her place? Was that the real solution?

"Look at the picture once more, Barfort. Does it so closely resemble Miss Coventry in feature, leaving that ear out of the question?"

"There is a resemblance," deliberately. "It seems a strong one at first glance. But the closer one examines the picture, the less perfect the likeness becomes. No!" with stern decision. "This picture was never taken from the face of Miss Coventry! And if, as you declare, you saw this birthmark on the woman who—"

Rapid steps echoed outside the chamber, and a sharp knocking followed at the closed door. Dan Dunn swiftly secured the photograph, then unlocked and opened the door, sharply ejaculating:

"You, Thompson! Why have you left your station on South Ninth?"

"I put Jamison on watch, sir, and come in a run to tell you that Knox Coventry is dead! Died last night, as I heard it, sir!" the shadow hastily explained.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DAN DUNN GETS DOWN TO BUSINESS.

If a dynamite bomb had suddenly exploded in their very midst, the three men could hardly have been more completely dumfounded than they were by this truly startling bit of news. And for a few moments even the Soft-Hand Sport seemed incapable of asking a question.

"It come about something like this, sir," added Abel Thompson; a tall, slender man of middle age, with the reddest of hair and the bluest of eyes. "I managed to pick up a nodding sort of acquaintance with the coachman, and a bit ago, noting a rather curious sort of bustle in and about the house, I took leave to tackle the fellow, who was ready enough to be pumped. And then he told me what happened."

"Last night late, or this morning early, rather, the old gent was suddenly taken worse; had another stroke, the man said. There was nobody with him except the nurse, I believe. He hinted that she was sound asleep at the time, but when I pinned him down, he admitted that this was only a guess of his own; he didn't like the woman overly well, it seems."

"The nurse alarmed the house, but it was all over in a flash. The old gentleman was dead before a doctor could be brought, though he was said to be sleeping in the house at the time."

"Dr. Craig Dairmid?" asked Dan Dunn, his eyes gleaming vividly.

"So the fellow said," nodded Thompson. "He also said that everything possible was done, but in vain. And then—"

"Well?" sharply demanded Dunn, as his man hesitated.

"It sounded so much like a lie that I hardly knew whether you'd care to hear it or not," bowed Thompson, apologetically.

"Let me be the judge of that. What did the fellow tell you?"

"That there was to be no funeral here. That the body was to be embalmed as quickly as possible, and taken to St. Louis for burial, he even went so far as to declare that he heard they were to remove it this very evening, sir!"

Berry Barfort, who had seemed stupefied by this wholly unexpected tidings, now started to his feet with a hoarse cry.

"Rena—poor girl! I must go to her!"

But Dan Dunn swiftly interposed, forcing the half-distracted man back as he made for the door, with a flash of his steel-gray eyes bidding Robert Turnbull close and lock the barrier at once.

"You'll do no such thing, Barfort," sternly uttered the detective, holding the lover helplessly in his strong grasp. "You'll remain quiet right here until I give you permission to leave."

"But—think of the poor girl, heartbroken by—confound you, Dan Dunn!" flashing hotly as he glared into those glowing eyes. "What right have you to stop me? What right?"

"A double right, sir. First, as your friend and well-wisher. Second, as an officer of the law with power to clap irons on even you, if you threaten to step in between me and my sworn duty!"

"But—"

"Not another word until I've got more time to spare. Turnbull, see that our friend don't break his neck by jumping out of the window, will you? Thompson, I hold you responsible for the door."

If there was a joke underlying all this, it was a very grim one. Dan Dunn was most intensely in earnest just then, for he believed the crisis was far too great to waste time in soft speech.

He opened his valise, taking therefrom a number of folded slips of paper, together with a fountain pen in readiness for use. He hurriedly but clearly filled in a few blanks on at least a dozen different papers, then rose and spoke rapidly to his men.

"You know what to do with these, lads," he said, giving some of the slips to Turnbull and the remainder to Thompson. "Don't let the grass grow under your feet! It's pure business from this to the end!"

The men took the papers and left the chamber without a word, covering their haste as much as possible until fairly clear of the hotel,

to guard against unwonted curiosity, then using all the speed they had at command to complete the work begun by their chief.

"Now, pardner, I'll talk a bit to you," turning to Barfort, who was struggling betwixt anger at such cavalier treatment and anxiety on account of his loved one.

"There's no need of words, Mr. Dunn," with forced composure. "I am going to offer Miss Coventry my assistance and sympathy in her sore trouble."

"Of course you know right where to find the lady?" softly asked the detective, a faint smile flitting across his face as he gazed keenly into that swiftly-changing countenance.

Barfort was staggered as by a heavy blow full in the face. Unless he granted that the woman who answered the detective's call the evening before—the woman who lacked the tip of her right ear, and which birthmark branded her as Harlequin Hattie—was Rena Coventry, where indeed was he to look for the bereaved daughter?

"You see what I meant, at least in part, Barfort," coolly resumed Dunn, easily enough reading that changing countenance. "Unless Miss Coventry has fooled you to the top of your bent, she is not now to be found at the house on South Ninth."

"Where then? Not—surely not—"

He could not force the terrible word from his throat, but Dan Dunn had better command over his vocal organs.

"Murdered? Not a bit of it, pardner! First, because that would be entirely too risky since they know I'm on their track. Unless— But you are sure you wasn't fooled when you last met the lady? You are positive it was Miss Coventry, and not a cunning substitute?"

"I am sure of that!" Barfort quickly replied; but even as the words passed his lips, he began to doubt.

Was he so sure, after having been so plainly befooled out at New Ulm? If Harlequin Hat could cheat both his eyes and ears then, what safeguard had he against another deception, only a little more elaborate? And his doubts showed clearly in his changing expression.

"If there is really another woman in the case, as I begin to hope for your sake, pardner, be sure there was dust thrown into your eyes on that occasion as well as later," nodded Dan Dunn, briskly, throwing far more hope and encouragement into his tones and looks than he felt in truth. "You were hardly fit for judging, then, and Harlequin Hat is a marvel at changing herself into another when she has a reason for so doing. Still—I'm believing they're only after the fortune which you say comes to Rena Coventry on her next birthday. They can secure that just as easily without painting their hands red, and so why run the risk of murder?"

Barfort made no reply. The subject was too hideous for him to argue its pros and cons.

"I begin to think that, after all, they had a double object in sending you out to New Ulm last night. I believe that was why Dairmid was at the lake!" with sudden conviction in his tones as the new light flashed upon a point which had given him no little uneasy thought. "It was to carry Rena Coventry to a secure hiding-place and—"

He bit his tongue in checking the words which leaped for exit. He dared not trust Barfort too far, in his present condition.

"You think—you know—"

"Let me think, and maybe I'll know more!" impatiently muttered the Soft-Hand Sport, knitting his brows, his keen wits busily at work.

Not for many minutes. Time was very precious now, since this unexpected complication had arisen, and he dared not linger too long. Yet, brief as was that period, it brought him a little more light, and the detective began to believe he held the clue by means of which the whole astounding scheme was to be unraveled and confounded.

He would have given considerable if he had Berry Barfort safely off his hands just then, for with the lover in such a thoroughly excited state, he dared not risk disaster to his plans by letting him go at will. Against such cunning and audacious schemers, he could not afford to neglect a single point.

His decision was quickly made. He would take Barfort up-town with him, and then contrive to place him in hands which could and would put him out of trouble-making!

Of course he said nothing about this sudden resolution, but made Barfort as presentable as possible with his own limited wardrobe, and then they descended and left the hotel in company, making for the end of the car-line nearest the building.

Before this was reached, Dunn impressed upon his companion the importance of concealing his agitation. It might well be that they were being shadowed, though he failed to detect any such attempt, and word might reach their cunning game enough in advance to work them ill.

Barfort promised, and kept his word fairly well, until Dan Dunn himself broke out most unexpectedly, leaping recklessly from the car and rushing across a vacant lot to halt a lumber wagon in which two men were seated.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Bill Flick!" sharply uttered Dunn, at the same time showing his detective badge and a revolver.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DAN DUNN'S GRIP.

THE "lake-bottomer" shrunk away, his sal-low, quinine-tanned face gaining an expression not unlike that which we attribute to a cornered fox; a sort of furious despair, in which chances are about even as to a tame surrender or a fight to the death.

"I hain't—ye don't got no right n'r nuthin' fer to—"

Dan Dunn deftly sent his left hand through sundry significant motions, plain enough to one posted in the silent language, but hardly to be detected by a stranger. Bill Flick clearly recognized at least one of those secret signals, and his face grew more deathlike than ever as he huskily panted:

"I cain't—thar's pore Tom—an' him waitin' fer his coffin!"

By this time Berry Barfort had reached the spot, and the Soft-hand Sport briefly directed him to wait with the driver of the team while the detective led Bill Flick a little apart for a few confidential words. Barfort nodded assent, though he was thoroughly puzzled by the whole affair.

"Don't you play the fool, Flick," coldly added the detective, as he motioned the fisherman to alight and bear him company out of earshot of his companion. "If brother Tom is to have a decent send-off, you want to listen to reason as I shovel it at you. Don't spoil everything by making me give you the collar, Bill!"

In silence the fellow left the wagon and followed the detective a few steps into the vacant lot, though his covertly roving glances betrayed a strong temptation to risk all on one desperate dash for liberty.

"Don't you try it, Bill," quietly uttered the Soft-hand Sport. "It would be a pity to plant both twins in one grave, especially when you come to think of the good old mother who—"

"Don't, boss!" shivered the haggard-eyed man, his gaunt face contorting with more than bodily pain.

"Whether I do or don't depends altogether on your own good sense, Flick," added Dan Dunn, facing the fisherman, and forcing their eyes to meet. "And it rests with you whether your poor old mother ever learns the truth of how her favorite twin died!"

"I'll measure the heart o' the critter as dar's to tell her!"

"But if that man kept too far from the bars of your cage, Bill? If your arms were never long enough to reach him? Wouldn't it be easier and surer to clap a seal on his lips before he told just how it came about, and what Tom was when he got his discharge? Or did Doc cow you clean out of your manhood last night?"

Flick gave a gasping cry as he gazed into that coldly smiling face. He caught a glimmer of the truth, and this was promptly confirmed by the detective himself.

"I heard and saw it all, Bill. That gentleman yonder and myself were the men your gang was hunting last night. We got out of the drink by means of the very tree on whose roots your twin met his death. And I was near enough to hear and see all that passed after you brought out his body."

"Then you know—I'm goin' a'ter a coffin fer—fer Tom."

"Tom can wait a little longer, for the sake of as nice an overcoat as can be found in St. Jo, Flick. Don't be an idiot, man!" with a warning frown as the fisherman shrunk away as though he would turn in headlong flight. "You can't outrun a bullet, and I'll kill you as I would a wild wolf if you don't hearken to reason!"

"What kin I do, boss?" almost whimpered the poor wretch, though to his credit be it said, none of his fears were for himself. "Thar's pore Tom waitin' fer—"

"And who have you got to thank for it, Bill Flick?" sharply interjected the detective, keeping his main point steadily in view through all. "Whose gold led poor Tom out of straight and honest paths? Who led him against the wishes and hopes and prayers of his good old mother? Who made of him a criminal first, a corpse afterward?"

"I know—I hain't fergot!" huskily muttered Flick, his sunken eyes flaming with savage resentment.

"So do I know, Bill," laughed Dan Dunn, his tone and manner changing as by magic. "I know, too, that those very tempters are coming to grief just as surely if in a little different fashion. It's foolish, perhaps, to tell you as much, but I'll give you a sweet cud to chew on while waiting for me. I'm going to clap the nippers on Doc Dairmid before this sun sets!"

"Devil toast him through all eternity!" grated Flick, viciously. "Ef it wasn't fer him an' his cussed gold, pore Tom wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't have fallen from grace and taken his twin-brother Bill with him!" quickly supplemented Dan Dunn, as the fisherman checked himself abruptly. "It's too late in the day for you to keep the truth covered up, Bill. I learned enough last night to not only put you behind

the cold checkerboard, but to blast the very name you bear. And if you don't want your old mother to hear the whole truth—

"It'd murder her! Don't—fer God a'mighty's sake!"

Dan Dunn placed a hand on each shoulder of the shivering wretch, forcing their eyes to meet, speaking gravely, earnestly:

"I've got to win the game I'm playing against the gang, Flick, even if it costs a dozen innocent lives like that of your mother. I believe you can help me twist a rope about Dairmid's neck if you will. Do what you can to help me in this, and I'll not only let you go free, with nothing to fear from your connection with the Night Hawks, but I'll make sure your mother shall never blush for the way her favorite son died. I'll make it appear that he was lost while serving the officers of the law, trying nobly to bring the sinners to justice.

"But if you refuse to give me what help and information I may ask for, I'll not only send you to the pen, but I'll publish your twin brother's actual record all over the country!"

"Now—not another word on that point. I've already lost too much time talking you over. Think of what I've said, and be ready to fight or knuckle by the time I come back.

"Who is that fellow in the wagon? Does he belong to the gang?"

"Jest a neighbor, boss," was the humble response. "He don't b'long to the gang. He jest rid up 'long o' me fer to help fetch the coffin."

Dan Dunn felt assured the fellow was telling the plain truth now, and without further ceremony he signaled Barfort, curtly saying to the countryman:

"You wait at the wood-market for Flick, stranger. He'll be with you in an hour, at the outside."

Signing Barfort and Flick to follow, Dan Dunn struck out for the World's Hotel, entering and proceeding at once to his chamber. Once inside, he spoke rapidly and to the point.

"Flick, I'll leave you in charge of this gentleman until I can get back to receive your answer. Barfort, this is the man I told you about who lost his brother on the very tree by means of which we got out of the wet last night. He's a member of the Night Hawks, bossed by Dairmid and Horace Haylock. Kill him rather than permit him to slip through your fingers, but treat him white as long as he remains docile. And, if you like, you can persuade him to tell you just what he knows about the movements of Doctor Dairmid and his gang around the lake."

Barfort promised to follow instructions, and then the detective hastened once more away from the hotel, eager to resume the work which he had dropped so hastily on catching sight of Bill Flick.

"Was it lost time?" he mused, as he swiftly strode up-town, trusting to his legs rather than to the sluggish cars. "Was it a foolish notion? Or was it an inspiration?"

Time would tell, he knew, and the chance was well worth the time he had spent on the lake-bottomer.

This might have been different if he had been playing the game single-handed, but such was hardly the case, though his brain ordered each and every move against the enemy. He knew that both Robert Turnbull and Abel Thompson were working under high pressure. And he knew, too, that his careful arrangements both at the mayor's office and with the city marshal, as the head of the police department was at that date known, would greatly facilitate matters. So far as human foresight could serve, every contingency was provided for in advance.

Being afoot, Dan Dunn could strike directly for his destination, and so make quicker time than he could by taking the cars and following its many crooks and turns; but swiftly as he covered the ground, he was none too soon for tireless Robert Turnbull.

When only a couple of squares from Coventry Place, Dan Dunn met his right-hand man in company with a constable, and even before he was nigh enough to exchange words, a brisk nod told him all was going right.

"All ship-shape, Mr. Dunn," quietly uttered Turnbull. "Will you take the lead now, or—"

"Go on as you've begun," curtly interjected the detective. "I'll just make sure our game is still on the premises, then give you the office. And you, officer," with a keen, searching glance into the constable's face. "You know that this is an important arrest?"

"Alive for choice, sir," was the grim response as he permitted the detective to glance over his warrant. "But dead if he won't be taken any other way!"

"Alive it must be!" frowned Dunn. "Look to that, Turnbull, will you? The doctor knows too much to be cut off right in his prime! Arrest him, but take him alive and unharmed!"

Turnbull silently nodded his understanding, and Dan Dunn hurried on in advance, to learn from his men on guard about the mansion if Dr. Dairmid was still on the premises. They reported in the affirmative, one of their number declaring that he had seen the doctor not ten minutes before. And on this information Dunn

gave Turnbull and the officer a sign to go ahead without further delay.

Hissilent orders were promptly obeyed, Turnbull keeping close at the heels of the constable, whose services it had been thought best to secure, but holding himself in readiness to take the lead in case of actual need.

Their summons at the front door brought a prompt response, and without a word of explanation beforehand the two men secured an entrance. Then the constable asked for Dr. Dairmid.

"He's up-stairs, sir," faltered the frightened servant. "He's—he's attending to the master, sir, and I don't think—"

"You're not paid for thinking," bluntly interposed the officer as he took a step toward the broad staircase. "Follow after and point out the room where the doctor is engaged. Refuse at your peril, my man!"

This was a naturally gruff voice, and unluckily he made it still gruffer and louder as he wished to thoroughly impress the frightened flunkey with his importance. In that silent house, sounds floated far and penetrated deep.

Dr. Craig Dairmid might have been very busy embalming his patient, or he might have already completed his preparations, but certain it is that he was very much upon the alert. He caught the echo of that harsh voice, and instantly divined danger. But if suspicious, he was also bold in his own way, and as quickly as possible he left the sick chamber and locked it after him as he flashed a stern, searching glance at the two men who were rapidly mounting the stairs, to meet him at the head.

"Who are you? How dare you intrude upon the—"

"You are Dr. Craig Dairmid," curtly interjected the officer, a bit of paper in his left hand, a revolver gripped in his right. "I have a warrant for your arrest, alive or dead. In the name of—"

"On what pretense? For what alleged crime, you ass?" harshly demanded the physician, his black eyes glowing ominously.

"For killing one Knox Coventry, and—"

With a hoarse, fierce roar the herculean doctor dashed forward, his muscular arms shooting out and his heavy fists knocking both men before him down the stairs. And then he leaped swiftly after them, clearing their bodies in his stride, to fling open the front door and—be caught in a steel-like pair of arms!

With a desperate vigor he fought for liberty, but in vain. Dan Dunn hurled him to the floor, then snapped the irons on his wrists!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BERRY BARFORT BRINGS A CLEW.

DAN DUNN bore the doctor company in that heavy fall, but he was as quicky up as down, laughing lightly as he gazed upon his prey, now helplessly ironed, with his arms bent behind his back.

But before he could utter the words of triumph which rose in his throat, he started sharply back, the wind of a bullet seeming to scorch his skin as it fairly grazed his right temple.

The almost fatal shot came from the landing at the top of the broad flight of stairs, and Dan Dunn caught sight of a pale but still beautiful face through the tiny cloud of blue smoke as it began to lift toward the ceiling. He instantly recognized Harlequin Hat, and only pausing long enough to see that Robert Turnbull was lifting himself from the carpet, he cried:

"Look to Doc, Robert! Kill him if you can't hold him!"

Brief as was the delay, it was long enough for that fiendishly beautiful countenance to fade out of sight, and though the Soft-Hand Sport took the flight in three agile leaps, he was just in time to see a door close near the further end of the hall.

He sprang to this, catching and turning the knob, but the door was already locked. Then, quick as thought itself, the detective turned back to the nearest door on the same side of the passageway, opening it and flinging up a window, leaning far out as he sounded a shrill whistle.

He flashed a keen glance along the side of the building, noting that two windows marked the room in which Harlequin Hattie had sought refuge, but contrary to his expectations neither of these were being utilized as a possible avenue of escape.

He had scarcely done as much, when his signal was answered, and two of his men came running across the green lawn, looking up at his window and holding themselves in readiness to take his instructions.

"Watch that room, lads!" cried the detective, in tones purposely loud enough to reach the ears of those who might be inside the apartment indicated. "One go around the corner and make sure that neither man nor woman gets out *that way*! Lively, now!"

This done, he lowered the window and secured it, then tiptoed to the door which he had left ajar on entering the apartment. He hoped rather than expected that Harlequin Hattie would attempt to escape by way of the passage,

thinking to accomplish this while her enemy was busied in giving his men on the outside their instructions. But not a sound to indicate any such attempt came to his ears, and after a brief pause he left the room and once more gained that locked door.

As he bent an ear to the keyhole, Dunn could distinguish faint sobs within, but he did not make the mistake of attributing them to Harlequin Hat. She was made of far different metal!

He substituted his eye, and a faint smile crept into his face as he saw the desperate woman standing behind a table, pistol in hand, the muzzle bearing full on the door, in readiness to send a bullet into the bosom of the detective should he force an entrance.

Tiny though his loophole was, it was sufficient for the Soft-Hand Sport to see that Harlequin Hat was still in the same "make-up" as when he had called to secure a glimpse of that tell-tale ear, though Berry Barfort would hardly have recognized this pale, fierce, hardened face as that which he had learned to love so ardently. If Dan Dunn had never before looked upon it, he would still have pronounced it the face of a criminal whose sins were finding her out at last!

Still without a sound to betray himself, the detective stepped to one side of the door, then clearly uttered:

"The game's played out, Harlequin—"

The spiteful report of a pistol drowned his words, and a bullet tore its way through the thin panel, just above and to the right of the knob, where the body of the speaker would naturally be supposed to stand in range. Dan Dunn laughed mockingly as he noted the tiny white splinters fly, and then he cried:

"Try the wall, Hattie, if you really wish to kiss yours truly by proxy! But—don't you think this is all folly on your part?"

"You devil! You bloodhound!" viciously cried the woman at bay.

"Call me pet names, darling! But that isn't business, Hattie, and you're an old stager enough to realize the fact. I've got the irons on Doc. I've sent out warrants for every member of the gang besides the chief and yourself. I reserved those choice morsels for my own delectation. And, Hattie, I reckon I'll have to beg you to make up your gentle mind to bear me company for a weenty bit o' while."

"You know where I am, if you mean me by Hattie," was the calmer response, after a brief pause. "I deny your right to arrest me, or to enter this, my private apartment. I know not who you are, but I am prepared to defend my life and honor—"

"Oh, Hattie!" moaned Dan Dunn, in a tone of assumed anguish.

"I am half-crazed by grief and loss of rest," steadily pursued the woman beyond the bullet-pierced door, craftily trying to smooth over the dangerous admission she had made in the first hot rush of angry despair. "I hardly know what I am saying. But—true as high Heaven records my words now! I'll kill you if you attempt to force your way in here! I'll shoot myself, rather than fall into the hands of an unknown ruffian!"

"Clap the muzzle to your right ear, then, Hattie, and perhaps you may be able to steal your way through the gates of Paradise undetected through that luckless little birthmark! Only for that—"

A sudden bustle in the entry below attracted his attention and cut his mocking speech short. Fearing lest by some means Doctor Dairmid was breaking away from custody, the Soft-Hand Sport sprang to the head of the stairs, pistol in hand. Rather than lose his prey now, he would cripple or even shoot him dead!

Fortunately his fears were without foundation in fact. Doctor Dairmid was sitting in a corner, under charge of the sturdy constable, who was something the worse for his ugly fall and roll down-stairs, but still able to keep his legs, one hand stanching the blood which flowed freely from his broken nose, the other covering Dairmid with a revolver, while Turnbull held two men in check at the threshold.

A dark frown shot into the face of the Soft-Hand Sport as he recognized Berry Barfort and Bill Flick in those two men, both eager-faced, and Barfort begging instant admission to the detective.

"I've got news—wonderful news!" he cried, as he glanced up to catch sight of Dan Dunn on the upper landing. "Bill Flick says—"

With hasty gesture Dan Dunn checked his eager speech, and with another signed Turnbull to admit both men. Barfort leaped swiftly up the flight, his face aglow with mingling hope and fears as he said:

"You know last night? Flick says that Dairmid and some other men brought a young lady down to the lake, and—"

Dan Dunn clapped a hand across those eager lips, then said to the lake-bottomer:

"Tell me, Bill, and sing your song mighty low! What did you see? No hearsay, mind you!"

"I jest see that they hed a ledly 'long. I see them take a boat an' pull out as ef they was goin' 'crost the lake, or makin' fer the bayou."

"That's all I see my own self, boss," was the swift response.

Dan Dunn frowned darkly. This information fell in fairly well with his own recent suspicions as to what had become of Rena Coventry if, as Barfort so positively declared, the woman now in the house and laying claim to that name was an impostor. But could he afford to give time to hunting down a mere chance?

He ran down the stairs and bluntly asked Dairmid if there was any truth in the rumor. The prisoner only showed his teeth in an ugly smile of hatred and defiance.

"I could make you sing, Doc, but maybe it's hardly worth while. You will keep, with those bracelets on, and there may be others to be found in a better humor. Officer, keep him under your pistol. Shoot him if he tries to make a break, or if any one else tries to help him get the better of you. Robert," turning to Turnbull, "you come and help me go through the house. We want the chief worst of all!"

Bill Flick gave a start, but shrunk back a bit as Dan Dunn caught at the involuntary gesture, his face turning a sickly white.

"Remember poor Tom, Flick!" quietly warned the detective. "You started to say something; what was it? Don't spit out a lie, William!"

"I wouldn't dast—to your own face, boss," huskily muttered the fisherman. "I jest loved to say that I met the chief goin' down the bottom-lake road as I was comin' up a'ter—"

"You are sur-?" sharply demanded the Soft-Hand Sport. "If you lie to me, Bill Flick, I'll hunt you to the very gallows!"

"I sw'ar it, boss, by the dead body o' pore Bill!" earnestly.

"Good enough! You and Barfort will go with me. Robert, you make it a point to see that nobody leaves the premises while I'm gone. Help the officer carry Doc up to the chamber where Knox Coventry is lying, and hold him there until I get back."

And after pointing out the chamber in which Harlequin Hat had taken refuge, Dan Dunn left the house in company with Barfort and Flick.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FORLORN HOPE.

JUST beyond that chamber door, Harlequin Hat was listening with an eagerness that seemed born of despair. Her face was ghastly in its pallor. Her eyes were filled with a hunted light. For all her motions were so catlike and silent, she was suffering enough to have driven nineteen out of every twenty women crazy.

Not for herself alone, though it was bitter as death to look at shameful defeat just when victory seemed assured. For the only being on the face of the earth whose life and liberty were precious to her.

She heard Bill Flick speak about meeting the chief on the bottom-road to the lake, and readily divined the purpose of the detective in putting Turnbull in charge of the premises for the time being. He, Dan Dunn, was to follow hot on the heels of her loved one, guided by the treacherous fisherman!

"Does he know? Was he one of the chosen few? Is there no means of warning Horace of danger? There *must* be—*there shall be!*" this woman with but a single redeeming trait mentally swore as she drew back from the keyhole, her blazing orbs seeming to scorch the tear-stained, fear-paled face of her maid, Clara Sandys.

"Stop your whimpering, little fool!" Harlequin Hat harshly muttered, as her slender fingers closed on the shoulder of the terrified maid, shaking her violently. "Do you want me to murder you by inches?"

"Don't—I wish I had—"

Harlequin Hat brought her other hand into play, lifting the trembling girl by the shoulders, holding her thus, with their faces nearly on a level. Her own eyes fairly burned with passion, and her face, beautiful in repose, was now a mirror in which her true nature was to be read only too clearly.

"Don't you push me too far, Clara," she said, her voice low but full of menace. "You want to play rat? You think to save yourself by throwing me over? You fool—worse than fool!" with intense bitterness flaming in her eyes and slipping from her tongue. "If you fail me now, I'll make sure you are not forgotten when pay-day comes! I'll fix it so you're lumped with the worst of us all! I'll swear to Barfort *you* concocted that scheme to draw him out to New Uln and—"

"I'll do it—I'll do anything, ma'am!" gasped the thoroughly frightened maid, closing her eyes to escape from that cruel glare.

Harlequin Hat slackened her fierce grip, fetching a smile to her face and a soft, pleading tone to her lips as they lightly touched the tear-dampened features of the girl.

"Forgive me, Clara, dear, if I spoke harshly, but I was thinking of—of him!" her voice breaking and tears dimming her eyes for the moment. "Help me to save him from those cursed bloodhounds! See!" and with the words she tore the jewels from her fingers to thrust them into the hands of the startled maid.

"Take these—and this!" adding a silken purse from the table beside them.

"But—what can I do, dear lady?"

Harlequin Hat made no immediate reply. She went to the window of her room, which was located on a corner, looking to the south and the east. She did not lift a window, for she could see the men whom Dan Dunn placed on guard still in open sight, even then with faces turned toward her apartment.

She bit her lips until the red blood tinged her teeth and marked her white chin. She bowed her head and covered her eyes the better to concentrate her thoughts.

Was there no method of escape? Was it impossible to leave the house without arrest? Could she devise no means of stealing away to warn Horace Haylock that all was lost?

Alone, she knew that there was not even the ghost of a chance. But might not Clara prove successful? Could not she steal outside and send or carry word to the chief in time to save him from the grip of that pitiless bloodhound, Dan Dunn?

At that reflection Harlequin Hat lifted her head and sprang to her feet, once more all action, all nerve and desperate resolve. There was a chance, and she would test it. If it failed her, she would force a passage through the house at the muzzles of her revolvers!

"Clara, swear that you will play the part I give you, or, true as there is a sun shining in the sky this minute, I'll murder you as I would a snarling cur that tried to bar my passage!" she uttered, her voice cold and deadly, her eyes glittering fiercely. "Swear that you will not sell me out! Swear you will play your part to the furthest possible moment!"

"I'll do what I can, Miss Rena," faintly responded the maid, trying to avoid betraying the deadly fear which was gripping her heart.

"Good enough, little one!" with a low, strained laugh that told how intensely she was being tried. "Now to work, and I'll read your lines over while we're dressing for the play!"

Already Harlequin Hat was removing her outer garments, and by her orders Clara Sandys imitated her example, so far as partially disrobing was concerned. Then the mistress hurriedly explained:

"Put on my clothes, Clara, and try to forget the maid in the lady! Pity you're not an inch or two taller, but remember you've got only men to fool—sharp-eyed enough, I admit, but still only men."

She was not idle while saying these words. She flung open a closet-door, dragging therefrom a small trunk. From this she took a suit of masculine garments, even to slouch hat and top-boots. And while hastily donning these she gave Clara her final instructions.

"It's our only chance, girl, but I'll pay you ten thousand-fold if you make a success of it. Hide your face in my thick veil. Slip downstairs and out at the side entrance, unseen by any one in the house if possible. If any one should try to stop you, fight through in spite and make all the racket you can!"

"If you get safely outside, run across the lawn and be sure you are seen and heard, then! I want them to catch you, or at least start in chase! Fight mainly to keep your face hidden. Then, when you can't keep it up any longer, simply swear that I sent you out to call the police. Swear that I told you we were being attacked and robbed by thieves!"

"If—if they should try to—shoot me?" faltered Clara.

"Don't be a fool, girl!" impatiently flashed Harlequin Hat, drawing on her boots and covering her head with the soft hat, its wide brim shading her features as she crossed the room to listen at an adjoining door before inserting the key and cautiously opening it. "Go out this way. They'll be less likely to see you before you can get to the side stairs. Remember!" gripping the veiled maid fiercely by the arm. "If you fail me through fault of your own, I'll swear your life away on the gallows if I have to bear you company in my own person! Succeed, and I'll make you rich enough to keep a dozen maids of your own for life!"

No talk of faith and fidelity. Only vicious threats on one hand, lavish reward on the other!

Would either prove effectual, Harlequin Hat could not avoid asking herself as she closed and relocked the door, hurrying across to the angle of her room whence she could gaze out at both of the men on guard below. Would Clara Sandys do her best? And even if she did try all she knew to win her reward, would it be of avail?

"It will—it must!" hissed the desperate adventuress through her colorless lips as she felt of the weapons at her waist. "But if it should fail, I'll shoot a passage through the curs if one woman can do that much! I'll avenge my love before that terrible grip closes upon his throat!"

Each moment was an age to that doubt-tortured woman. Was Clara Sandys already whispering her secret to one of those bloodhounds? Was she really stealing unseen to the side door? Would she—

Harlequin Hat caught her breath sharply as she saw a richly-garbed, heavily-veiled figure

rushing away from the building, straight across the smooth-cropped lawn, apparently heading for the side gate.

And she caught the warning cry which broke from one of the men on guard beneath her windows—she saw him break into a swift run after the fleeing figure, whose voice was now lifted in shrill, piercing shrieks as she fled across the grass!

Harlequin Hat sprang to the rear of her apartment, dashing up one of the windows there, not daring to make sure her second guard had joined in the chase, though trying to pray that he might. At best Clara could not conceal her identity long, and discovery meant fresh suspicion on the part of her enemies.

Fortunately for her, there was a low terrace coming close to the rear of the house, but had the distance been twice as great, the thoroughly desperate woman would have dared the leap for the bare chance of warning Horace Haylock in time to flee from capture.

She leaped lightly through the window and rushed swiftly to the stables hard by, just casting a glance over her shoulder to see Clara struggling desperately in the grip of her two guards. Then, just as the men discovered their mistake, a fiery young steed dashed out and over the lawn, leaping the picket fence, Harlequin Hat sending back a defiant laugh as she sat her barebacked steed like a centaur!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DIVING INTO A DEATH-TRAP.

DAN DUNN lost no time in acting on the chance clew which Berry Barfort brought him, thanks to Bill Flick, the lake-bottomer.

He quickly picked up half a dozen men on whose nerve he could depend, and arming them with rifles and revolvers, started in two teams for the lake. Taking boats at Dunford's, without stopping to answer any of the curious questions poured upon him by the worthy host of that name, he struck across the lake for the mouth of the bayou. And not until the long, deep, river-like stretch of water was fairly entered, the gently-rising point of land lying between it and the lake proper shutting off all view from the further shore, did the Soft-Hand Sport see fit to question Flick more closely concerning his knowledge of the trip Dr. Dairmid made to Lake Contrary the night before, and of the Night Hawks' Nest which he now knew was hidden somewhere in that region.

Flick had little new to offer. He had only known that a lady was with Dairmid when he crossed over in the direction of the bayou that night, but that no such person was with him when he returned. As for the Night Hawks' Nest, he could give a little more information, though he had never visited the place since it was taken possession of by the evil gang into which, mainly through the avarice of his twin brother, he had been drawn as a private.

The Nest was nothing more than a rude one-story "stick-and-daub" cabin, containing but a single room, originally owned by a small gang of woodchoppers, but deserted by them when their contract was completed.

By the time Flick imparted this much information, they reached a shallow offset from the bayou proper, locally known as "The Right Arm," and at a signal from their guide, the men, one boat closely following the other, turned into this channel.

For a short distance there was plenty of water, the banks rising abruptly a veral yards high, covered over with a dense growth of vines and bushes, with patches of briars and wild roses. Then the distance between the banks widened, the water shoaling at the same time, moss, weeds, snags and old lily-roots or stems covering the surface and making it no easy task to impel the boats over or through the obstructions with oars, after the usual fashion.

"Jes' sock 'em in an' pull hard as fur's ye kin drive, then let the oars hang fer the moss to slip off as the boat crawls ahead," advised Flick, catching a stem or two of the peculiar growth and with difficulty breaking the slender stem, surrounded by stiff, harsh and pointed leaves, if leaves they may be called. "It's a heap wuss then even the lily-stems when the pads come atop in summer, an'—you see 'yen' cottonwood, boss?" interrupting himself to point out the top of a tall tree rising in view just around the curve in the shoaling arm. "Waal, right thar by the root o' that tree's whar Doc must 'a' left his boat ef he tuck the lady to the Nest, as you reckon."

"Then the Nest itself must be close at hand?"

"Nigh half a mile further up, but right thar they's a sort o' mud-bar which ye can't easy yank a boat over, an' though they's deep water a bit further on, it don't take long to reach the eend o' the Arm. An' it's nigher to the cabin by land then ef ye went clean all the way up yender, anyway."

A few strokes more carried both boats around the curve, and Dan Dunn curiously inspected the tall cottonwood, standing with half its roots eaten off by the water in flood-times, its base partially overhanging the water, and rude steps cut in the sandy bank as though the

spot was used quite frequently for landing purposes.

Dunn was seated in the bow of his boat, with Bill Flick directly behind him, kneeling on the narrow water-board in the bottom of the skiff. Barfort was in the second boat, seated in the stern. Two men plied the oars in each boat, while two others held rifles for themselves as well as for the men thus occupied.

"Look— Ah! Now I hev got it!" suddenly screamed Bill Flick.

The cause was no mystery. Just beyond the cottonwood tree, in the edge of the dense brush through which he must have been forcing his way when the voices in the boats or the sound of rowing startled him, stood Horace Haylock, rifle at shoulder and smoke thinly masking its muzzle!

Dan Dunn felt the wind of the missile as an unconscious movement on his part saved his own life. He heard the wild scream from his guide's lips, but he never paused to look back. He sprang over the bow of the boat, at the same time lifting the muzzle of his repeater, thinking to wing the desperado before he could do further harm; but he sunk over his knees in the ooze, and his impetus pitched him headlong on his face, driving his rifle half its length into the mud.

It was never known for a certainty whether Horace Haylock meant to kill the detective, as his most dreaded enemy, or if he intentionally sent his lead deep into the chest of the man who he knew by instinct was playing traitor to himself and the Night Hawks.

Enough that, after his single shot, he turned and fled like a man who feels capture means death or worse—a lifelong imprisonment!

The men in the boats were thrown into confusion by this totally unexpected attack, and as Dan Dunn was temporarily out of the race, the desperado vanished from sight before a single shot could be returned. And though blood was tinging his lips, Bill Flick was the man to say:

"Run—chase—cut off—lake!"

With a desperate flounder and mud-tinctured curse, Dan Dunn extricated himself, leaving his rifle behind as he dashed up the bank and took the trail like a bloodhound.

Thus having an example set them, the men hastily landed and set off in chase, several following after the detective, the rest branching off to reach the lake by the shortest course, thinking that their game might have a boat on that side, and would endeavor to distance them by pulling direct across to the further shore.

Despite his disadvantage at the start, Dan Dunn was close enough to the fugitive at the beginning to hear his mad crashing through the weeds and stunted undergrowth, and he strained every nerve to overtake Haylock before he could reach the log cabin and barricade himself inside. Though such a move must prove fatal in the end, that was not what the detective wanted most.

"Alive, Horace!" he mentally vowed. "I'll take you down-river to make your last speech and dying confession while standing on the little trap-door—mind that, now!"

Suddenly he ceased to catch the sounds so far made by the fugitive, and seeing no signs of a clearing near at hand, the Soft-Hand Sport drew his revolver and held thumb on its hammer, ready to bring down his game by a snapshot if such should prove necessary to save himself from a vicious attack. But Horace Haylock had not stopped at bay, but, entering a path where the brush was less dense, he was still racing for life, dear to him despite his many crimes.

Dan Dunn was just in time to catch a glimpse of the desperado as he threw himself over a rail fence into a field which had not been plowed or planted that season, a few dried corn-stalks still standing up here and there.

Instinctively the detective flung forward his pistol-hand, the silver bead showing distinct against the dark shoulders of the fugitive, and asking but a quick contraction of the finger on the trigger to end the chase then and there. But Dan Dunn never fired. Instead, he replaced the weapon and cleared the high fence with a bound that was deer-like in its elasticity.

Better for his hopes if he had risked a shot, trusting his skill to cripple without killing! For though he cleared the top rail beautifully, one foot landed in a deep cow-track at the edge of the plowing, turning his ankle and causing him to fall in a painful heap with terrible force, fairly knocking the breath out of his body.

And, though he quickly recovered himself, precious moments were thus lost, to say nothing of the sharp twinge which warned him his ankle had not entirely escaped injury.

Dashing the dirt from his eyes, he saw Horace Haylock almost across the narrow field, running like a frightened deer, plainly making for the rude bridge which crossed a sluggish, muddy slough.

Furious with rage, Dan Dunn sent an unsteady shot after the fugitive, but his obscured sight failed him just then, and a mocking yell came back from the lips of the desperado as he

lightly scaled the further fence with safety almost within his grasp!

That shot guided Barfort and the rest of the force who had kept after Dunn, and they swarmed over the fence, Barfort lending the detective an arm until he again warmed to the chase.

Horace Haylock crossed the dirt-covered bridge of logs, then ran with unabated speed across the sandy, willow-covered point of land which alone separated him from his boat, beyond which, again, lay what is locally known as "the head of the lake." His intent was to take to the water, rowing across in a diagonal course to the point on the further shore where the various rude roads, already mentioned while describing the chase given the phaeton by Robert Turnbull, all united in striking the lake-shore. From thence he could readily make his way up-town, long before his enemies could return to their boats, pull down the bayou and cross over to their teams at Dunford's.

It was a scheme that promised fair, but even before he reached the spot where his boat lay, Haylock saw several men armed with rifles recklessly wading out into the shallow water below him, ready and able to pick him off in case he made the attempt to cut across as he intended. And just coming in sight near the rude bridge he saw Dan Dunn and his men, hunting him like bloodhounds!

By this time the detective no longer felt his sprained ankle. His blood was up to boiling pitch, and he would have run on his stumps just then, with that criminal before his eyes. He saw that Haylock was leaping into his boat, too excited to rush it out over the shallow bottom before flinging himself in to grasp the oars. But though he lost time in shoving his light skiff to where it floated free, he was still too far ahead to be arrested without shooting.

So the others reasoned, and they believed the same when Dan Dunn snatched a single-shot Winchester from one of them, sending the lead skipping viciously past the skiff, now heading further up toward the head of the lake, the sooner to reach cover.

Throwing out the empty shell, and carefully inserting a cartridge, which he took from his pocket, Dan Dunn dashed to the water's edge.

By this time the fugitive had reached the immense bed of moss, as it is called, which every season fills the upper portion of the lake to within a few inches of its surface. It was slow work and hard to row through this, and leaping to his feet he converted one blade into a paddle, sweeping the water in waves to the rear, first on one side, then on the other, making much faster progress than before.

"He'll get away if we don't rope him fast with a bit o' lead, boss!" excitedly cried one of the men, handling his weapon eagerly.

Dan Dunn made no reply in words, but raised his rifle after a keen glance to measure his distance. He followed the motion of the boat, though this was hardly perceptible from their position, as it was almost exactly "stern-on." Then his finger touched the trigger, and a cry of wonder simultaneously burst from his followers as they noted the result of that single shot.

The lead struck fair at the rear edge of the keel, and a report that sounded like a miniature echo of the shot accompanied the little puff of blue smoke from under the shattered stern. The explosive ball had literally ripped the boat's bottom open from stern to stem!

"Look! don't dive— Merciful God!" gasped one of the men who was more familiar with the lake and its peculiarities than the rest.

Horace Haylock, seeing his boat filling with water and sinking beneath him, dropped paddle and joining his hands over his head, dove far out beyond the bows, sinking from sight with an audible splash.

The spray settled down, the waves rolled aside, but the head of the desperado did not reappear. Instead—only a few feet from where he first struck the water, his feet, wildly waving, just broke the surface.

The terrible moss held him in its death-grip!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

"WHAT is it? What does it all mean? Why don't he come up?" cried the puzzled detective, as he watched those feet convulsively waving just above the troubled surface, every few seconds vanishing from sight, but to reappear again.

"It's got him—the moss!" shiveringly explained the man who had involuntarily shouted forth a warning to the desperado not to make an effort at diving, for his life. "He'll never come up—'thout help from the outside. A frog couldn't dive that way and keep from being drowned by the awful stuff!"

For the first time realizing the awful truth, Dan Dunn dropped his rifle and rushed forward, splashing the shallow water high. He felt that he would a thousand times rather Horace Haylock had escaped his chase than meet his death after this fashion—felt that he would give a hand to save him from the

* Note:—A literal fact.

death-trap into which he had so recklessly hurled himself.

"You can't do it, boss!" earnestly cried the man, reaching his side and pointing to where the dense mass of moss began to show itself. "No man can wade or swim through that. And—it's too late now!"

With a trembling hand he pointed to where one foot was visible on the surface of the water, lying still as the element surrounding it.

Dan Dunn saw this, and knew what it meant. Horace Haylock had ceased his desperate efforts to tear himself from that horrible death-trap, his agony at an end. There might be a faint hope of restoring him to consciousness if he could be that instant removed from the water and manipulated by untiring, practiced hands; but that was impossible.

Dan Dunn turned about and made his way through the mire to dry land, hoarsely uttering to his men:

"We can't let him stay there. Go fetch the lightest boat across the Neck, then pull up here and bring the poor wretch ashore."

There were six of the men now, excluding himself and Barfort, for those who had taken the shortest route to the lake-shore in hopes of cutting off the fugitive Night Hawk had hurried up on witnessing the catastrophe. And as the detective uttered these words, they hastened back to the Right Arm, to sling a boat on poles and drag it across to the lake.

Dan Dunn sunk down on the ground in the fast-deepening twilight, burying his face in his hands. Dead—and he had sworn to capture him alive! Dead—and through the shot fired by his hand!

Berry Barfort stood near, troubled no less sorely, though from an altogether different motive. Where was the secret Nest of the Night Hawks? Was Rena Coventry hidden there, a captive? If so—

"Brace up, man!" he hoarsely cried, as his fingers closed on the bowed shoulder of the detective. "We must find the Nest! We must find Rena, or—"

The clear echo of a rifle or revolver shot cut him short, and both men instinctively glanced after the half-dozen men who were going to the Right Arm, naturally thinking that one of these had fired or was being fired at. But only to see their mistake. And then another shot came to draw their eyes to the right.

Even as they fixed the point from whence the report came, a third was heard, and Dan Dunn instantly divined something of the truth.

"It's meant for a signal, and I'm betting it comes from at or near the Nest itself! Come, Barfort! Look to your tools, but hold fire until I give the word!"

A motion of his hand sent his men running toward the same quarter, and after a few minutes' struggle with the dense brush, briars, vines and stunted second-growth, the Soft-Hand Sport burst out into a little clearing where he caught sight of a gaunt figure just in the act of firing another shot with revolver pointed toward the sky. And that figure was none other than Bill Flick!

Bill Flick, alive though his front was a mask of blood which was still ebbing through the rude bandage his own hands had improvised. His face was ghastly pale, and his eyes seemed to have sunken deep into their sockets. But there was a grim pleasure in his voice as he pointed to a youthful-looking figure in masculine garments lying with upper body supported by a stump close at hand.

"It's a *her*, boss! An' I reckon she's—"

"Harlequin Hat!" ejaculated the Soft-Hand Sport, staring as though unable to realize the startling truth. "How came you here?"

"You bloodhound!" gasped the woman, feeling for the weapons of which she had been robbed by Bill Flick when he came upon her, crippled and nearly fainting as she dragged herself toward the little cabin in hopes of warning her loved one to flee from worse than death. "I'll kill you if—say *he* is not dead! Say you have not harmed him—my love, my husband!"

"If you mean Horace Haylock, Hattie," gravely began Dunn, only to stop short as the woman divined the truth and flung herself sideways from the supporting stump, groveling with her face in the dirt, sobbing and moaning as though her crime-hardened heart must burst.

Dan Dunn saw that one of her legs was broken, and with a fierce frown he turned toward Bill Flick, to be met with:

"I never pulled onto her, boss. It was jest that way when I fust ketched sight. She was crawlin' to'rds the cabin, callin' out to the chief, an' she was so clean played that she couldn't even kiver me when she pulled. Then I tuck her guns, an' fired to show you the way here."

Dan Dunn hurried to the cabin, only to meet Barfort coming out of the door, sore disappointment written on his face.

"Not here, and no signs of her!" the lover huskily muttered. "Make *her* tell! I'll have the truth out of her if I have to tear—"

"Go slow, pardner," coldly interrupted the Soft-Hand Sport, once more his old self, checking the half-crazed lover with a hand of steel. "She'll tell all she knows, I reckon, as soon as she fairly realizes how completely the game is

lost. But she's a woman, and a crippled woman at that; crippled in body and worse hurt in her heart!"

As it was almost certain there were no others of the evil gang at or about the Nest, Dan Dunn again ordered his men to make all haste in conveying a boat across the Neck to secure the body of the Night Hawk chief, which they were to bring at once to the cabin.

When this step was taken, Dan Dunn knelt beside Harlequin Hattie, forcing her to drink a liberal potion from his pocket-flask. And then he placed her in an easier position, straightening her broken leg, satisfying himself that the injury was not a particularly serious one.

While thus occupied, he frankly told her how Horace Haylock had come to grief in his desperate dash for liberty, making no attempt to deny his own firm resolve to capture the criminal who was so dear to her lawless heart, but swearing that he would have lost a hand sooner than have his prey escape him in such a manner.

Harlequin Hat listened in silence, choking back her bitter grief as few women could have done, and sullenly refusing to utter a word until she could see for herself that all was lost. But when, long after night had settled over the scene, and the lonely spot was lighted up by the red glare of a huge fire which Bill Flick kindled, the men slowly entered the circle of light, bearing between them the ghastly corpse of Horace Haylock, once chief of the Night Hawks, she broke down completely and made full confession.

Barfort hung on her lips with breathless interest, but neither he nor Dan Dunn could fairly comprehend her meaning. Bill Flick had better success. He stole away from the spot, and a few minutes later his voice was heard, lifted in an exultant shout.

"Hyar she am, boss? Leastways hyar's the 'tater-pit ma'am was tryin' fer to tell ye 'bout!"

The words hardly passed his lips before Dan Dunn and Barfort were at his side, and then—was it a ghostly voice?

"Help! save us! Oh, Berry—Berry!"

As if by instinct the lover found from whence that well-known voice proceeded: a small wooden spout rising from the earth in the center of a clump of bushes, and kneeling beside it, he called aloud to Rena Coventry, his loved one, his true!

Dan Dunn and Bill Flick were far more practical. They looked for the proper entrance, and soon discovered it, though hidden with such jealous care. And tearing open the dirt-covered door, the Soft-Hand Sport sprang into the pit, striking a match and holding it above his head to recognize—

The original of that first photograph which had caused him so much uneasiness while viewing it at Berry Barfort's boarding-house! The man whom Dr. Dairmid had proclaimed dead! The man who was to be embalmed and shipped to St. Louis, to be buried by the side of his wife!

"Cut us loose, please, and take us out of this horrible hole!" Knox Coventry said, in tones remarkably strong for a dead man. "Barfort!" as that worthy came tumbling into the little pit. "Thank heaven you've come at last! Every day spent in here has seemed an eternity!"

But Berry Barfort never heeded if he heard. His arms were tight wrapped about Rena, his lips smothering her sobs of tremulous joy!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CASTING LIGHT ON DARK PLACES.

DAN DUNN was the first one to abandon the pit, and a very brief time spent in weighing the situation decided his course of action.

Horace Haylock was dead. Harlequin Hat was a captive, crippled. Dr. Dairmid was in irons and under perfectly trustworthy guard. Warrants had been issued for all the other members of the gang, so far as the detective had been able to trace them out. Robert Turnbull, though by some strange means as yet only to be surmised he had permitted Harlequin Hat to elude him, was at the head of affairs in town, and could be depended on to see that no very great mistake was made.

Dan Dunn wrote a few lines on the leaf of his note-book, gave it to one of two men, bidding them take the boat by means of which they had recovered the body of the Night Hawk chief and row at once to Dunford's. They were to take one of the teams and hasten to town, then drive back with a doctor whose name was written, one of the two men coming to act as guide, the other to report all to Turnbull.

When this was set in motion, Dunn and his men set about making all things as comfortable as possible for a night on the Neck. Then, little by little, the remaining mysteries were cleared away.

Horace Haylock was really a nephew to Knox Coventry, though there had been but slight communication between them, for while yet a mere lad, the nephew had fallen among evil companions, quickly proving himself an adept at all daring breaches of the law.

Horace Haylock, as he called himself, though he was known by a different name when a lad,

possessed the "family features" in a marked degree, and this facial resemblance was in the end put to the test without being detected even by a daughter's love.

Haylock met Harlequin Hat, and they were married. Each loved the other with a fierce, reckless passion which death itself could not entirely kill. And when Horace saw how perfectly his wife resembled his cousin in figure, and how readily she could change her face, he conceived the audacious plot which, but for a series of accidents, would almost surely have proved a complete success.

Clara Sandys, seduced by her lust of gold, aided them materially. She furnished photographs and portraits, by studying which Horace was enabled to have a beard and wig made to imitate that worn by Knox Coventry. She even introduced both Horace and Hattie into the house to perfect themselves in minor details. And then, thanks to Rena's visit to St. Louis, the first stroke was delivered.

Knox Coventry was drugged and conveyed to the secret pit on the Neck. Horace took his place, and pretended to be stricken down by partial paralysis, the more surely to baffle the eyes of Rena. Dr. Dairmid was taken in as physician, instead of the regular family physician. Harlequin Hat played the role of nurse, as Martha Prevost. Rena was sent for, and then kept from seeing her parent, to still further break her nerves and make her more ready to bend to their cruel will.

Enough has already been said to indicate the original plans of the schemers. Rena was to be made believe her father was a vile criminal, in peril of his life, unless she would forever renounce Berry Barfort and agree to marry Doctor Dairmid. This was to force her into rejecting Barfort, and thus keeping him from the house, as well as from the wedding which was to follow as soon as the next birthday of the heiress came to pass.

But Rena was not to play the part of bride in that ceremony. She was to be removed much as her father had been before her, as soon as it was sure Barfort had received his dismissal. Harlequin Hat was to go through the empty form with Doctor Dairmid, who was to receive a goodly share of the plunder by way of payment. Then, when the fortune was secured, and as much of Knox Coventry's property converted into cash as might be done without too great delay, the schemers were to flee, leaving orders for their victims to be restored to liberty.

The reader who has followed us this far knows why the original plan was modified, and need hardly be told over again, at this point.

With Dan Dunn on their track, they dared not risk so long a delay.

For this reason they suddenly gave out that Knox Coventry was dead, and would be embalmed and taken to St. Louis, there to be buried beside the bride of his younger days. The coffin was procured. A false body was arranged, fitted with a mask of wax over a plaster cast taken from the face and head of Horace Haylock in his rôle of Knox Coventry.

By pleading the necessity of haste, they hoped to carry through the deception, permitting only a few intimate friends of the real merchant to view his remains, and they only through the glass plate covering his supposed face. The resemblance was perfect enough to deceive even the keenest-eyed.

Partly to leave the road clear for Doctor Dairmid to convey Rena Coventry to the secret Nest on the Neck, Berry Barfort was lured to New Ulm Gardens, where Harlequin Hat hoped to completely disenthral him by making him believe his loved one was entirely lost to all sense of propriety. They even calculated on the Soft-Hand Sport also attending the ball, and in case he should, both he and Barfort were to be killed or beaten to helplessness by the gang provided for the occasion.

It was Rena Coventry who met Barfort in the parlor that day, and she tremblingly, sobbingly confessed that she suffered ten-fold the torture she was forced to inflict; but, what could she do? Her own father, as she believed, had confessed his crimes and begged her to save him from a shameful death—begged her by the sacred memory of her sainted mother, his departed wife!

Part of what is condensed here, was learned from Rena and her father, part from the lips of Harlequin Hat, whose fiery spirit seemed utterly quenched by the death of her idolized husband.

Bill Flick told how he had contrived, badly hurt though he was, to crawl from the boat and up the bank. He found the rifle which Horace Haylock cast away, and saw why the Night Hawk chief had made no stronger or more persistent effort to beat back his enemies and take revenge. The shell of the cartridge he fired had jammed in the attempt to eject it, thus rendering the weapon useless for the time being.

Harlequin Hat explained how she effected her escape from the house on South Ninth, riding at speed to warn her husband of danger, taking the rough road around the head of the lake, not daring to use the easier and shorter route by way of Dunford's, lest some of Dan Dunn's emissaries should recognize and intercept her.

She might have succeeded, only for her horse falling over a root, rolling over her and breaking a leg, besides rendering her insensible for many minutes. She told how she had dragged herself over the terrible stretch to—fall in the end!

As soon as her injured limb would permit it, Harlequin Hat was taken to St. Louis to answer for her crimes. Dr. Dairmid and others of the Night Hawk gang had preceded her thither.

They were brought to trial, and though the crime of murder could not be fastened upon either of the two principal prisoners, they were each given a long term in the Penitentiary.

Kid Price, Pony Keefe, Mace Wilson and a dozen others were also convicted and duly sentenced.

Dan Dunn, however busy, did not forget the service rendered by Bill Flick, and "brother Tom" received a burial which is, to this day, often talked about by the "lake-bottomers." And Tom's mother never knew that her favorite son had died while leading a criminal life.

As for Bill Flick, he still resides near the lake, contentedly fishing for a living.

Dan Dunn attended to his professional business at St. Louis and "put it through" in ample time to attend the quiet wedding in which Berry Barfort was made supremely happy, and Rena Coventry was made Mrs. Berry Barfort. The ceremony took place at home, and only a few particular friends were in attendance. One of them was venerable Dr. Garfield, once more installed as family physician.

But, shortly after this wedding—which occurred on Rena's attaining her majority, strictly in accordance with the terms of the misanthropic will which had been at the bottom of all their trouble—Knox Coventry left St. Joseph to make his home with his children in St. Louis.

This was mainly to avoid the disagreeable notoriety which became attached to him when his reported death had to be explained away.

Clara Sandys vanished, no one seemed to know whither. And she may have altered her occupation, since she never applied to Rena for "a character!"

Dan Dunn is still in harness, and Robert Turnbull serves him just as faithfully as ever.

And as one of his gifts to his happy bride, Berry signed a pledge of his own drawing up, never to drink, gamble or—be jealous!

THE END.

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